THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

APRIL 50¢ PDC

NAPOLEON SOLO ★ ILLYA KURYAKIN

Men were dying soundlessly on city streets. And while a world wondered and despaired, Solo and Illya battle *THRUSH*'s newest terrible weapon of destruction—

THE UNSPEAKABLE AFFAIR

A *NEW* Complete Novel of Extraordinary Power

TWO YEARS – 24 ISSUES – FOR ONLY $8

Get this special Two Year Subscription to
THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

THINK OF IT—twenty-four suspense U.N.C.L.E. novels—the most action-packed, popular espionage-adventure entertainment being offered today—and all for the price you would pay for just *sixteen!* Yes, every month you can receive a brand new U.N.C.L.E. full length novel—plus fiction of outstanding distinction by famous authors. We challenge any crime-adventure magazine on the stands to match this superb lineup of top-drawer reading entertainment. Subscribe now—and save $4.00. Merely by filling in the conveniently placed coupon below you can save one-third the newsstand purchase price—and at the same time increase your reading enjoyment a hundredfold! Add $1.00 for foreign subscriptions, please.

WE MAKE THIS unusual introductory offer to subscribers because we want to assure you of receiving *The Man From U.N.C.L.E. Magazine* every month—twelve full quotas for the best reading enjoyment every year—for two years in a row! Subscribe now—and you won't have to search through crowded newsstands for issues which may have been already sold out! Remember—*The Man From U.N.C.L.E. Magazine* will come to you promptly—24 consecutive months—each time with an entirely new full length novel featuring the most dynamic and popular fiction spy characters in existence today!

DON'T FORGET—these great novels, featuring the famous U.N.C.L.E. lead characters, Waverly, Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo, will be the espionage adventure reading standouts of this decade, just as M.G.M.'s dynamic T.V. series of the same name has broken all rating records in its field. Subscribe NOW—and you won't miss a single story!

FILL YOUR ORDER *in now! Subscribe for your friends—you'll be giving a thrilling present at the biggest and best bargain of your crime-reading life—and theirs! Two years—24 issues—yours for only $8.00. Add additional dollar ($1.00) for Canada, Mexico, Pan American and all foreign countries.*

LEO MARGULIES CORP.
160 West 46th Street, New York, New York. 10036

Kindly enter my subscription to **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE** for two years (24 issues) @ $8.00. Add $1.00 for foreign postage.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY, STATE, ZIP NO. .....

Please print APRIL—202

THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.
MAGAZINE
NAPOLEON SOLO · ILLYA KURYAKIN

APRIL, 1966 Vol. 1, No. 3

NEW FULL LENGTH U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE UNSPEAKABLE AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Mute, powerless to speak or write, they choked and died, the gallant men who had unearthed a demoniac THRUSH master plan to enslave U.N.C.L.E. and the entire free world—but who had to carry their dread secret with them to their graves! . . . . . 2 to 70

TWO EXCITING LONG STORIES

HOUSEBOAT
RICHARD DEMING 84

IT'S MURDER OUT THERE
BRYCE WALTON 104

NEW SHORT STORIES

HOODOO HOUSE
JOHN REESE 72

". . . WHO MARRIED DEAR OLD DADI"
ED LACY 101

A CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM
STUART M. KAMINSKY 124

THE STOLEN PAINTING
DAN ROSS 132

TOO MUCH ALIBI
T. C. McCLARY 138

LEO MARGULIES
Publisher

CYLVIA KLEINMAN
Editorial Director

H. N. ALDEN
Associate Editor

THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE. Vol. 1, No. 3. April, 1966. Single copies 50¢. Subscriptions $6.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $7.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by Leo Margulies Corp., 160 West 46th St., N.Y., N.Y. 10036.
© 1966, by Leo Margulies Corp. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International and Pan-American copyright convention. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious. Printed in the United States of America.

THE UNSPEAKABLE AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Mute, powerless to speak or write, they gasped and were no more—the gallant men who had unmasked Thrush's most diabolical plot—and who now must carry their incredibly grim secret to the grave!

ACT I—IN THE BEGINNING WAS SILENCE

THE MAN was tall and slender. He staggered as he walked, half ran, down the East Side street toward the river. His head turned every few yards to look behind him.

There was no fear in his eyes, only concern, worry, an anxiety that made him break into a full run as he neared the first street corner.

The street he ran on was in the East Fifties of New York. A dark night, with a wind; the street lamps cast only feeble circles of light.

For all his haste and anxiety, the man was clearly trained to danger. When he looked behind, it was not under the street lights but between them, in the darker areas, where he could have seen anyone follow-

© 1966, by Metro Goldwyn Mayer

FEATURING

NAPOLEON SOLO and ILLYA KURYAKIN

ing him as the follower was revealed by the light.

There was no one behind the running man, and he turned into a street of small brownstones that stood silent and innocent between a three-story whitestone building and a public garage. He passed the three-story white building, a faint smile on his face. His goal in sight, his guard down for an instant, he did not glance at the three men in full evening dress who came out of the whitestone building as he ran past.

The three men swayed as if drunk, laughing, their voices slurred in the night. The running man barely glanced at them, and ran on. The instant he was past them, the three men in full dress ceased to sway. Their laughter vanished; their voices spoke to each other sharp and crisp.

"Now!" the tallest one cried.

The sharp hiss of his voice was matched the next instant by three piercing spitting sounds. Three, and no more. One short, harsh *puh-puh-puh* from each gun that had appeared in the hand of each dress-suited man.

Puh-puh-puh!

The running man seemed to leap forward, his feet off the ground, hurtling. His head jerked back, his arms flung out, and he sailed through the air of the dark street like some horrible, grotesque bird.

He seemed to hang there in the cold air for a long minute, flung up and forward, suspended on air. Then he sprawled face down on the hard concrete.

He did not move for a moment. Then, slowly, impossibly, he began to crawl. Three holes in his back, blood drenching the silent street, the man crawled. Slowly, painfully, like some crushed insect that still weakly moved its legs.

The three men in dress suits watched. Their pistols were still in their hands, the long, ugly silencers pointed at the crawling man. One spoke.

"Stubborn, these U.N.C.L.E. fools," the tallest man said. "They can't even die simply. Dimitri!"

The heaviest of the three nodded, stepped forward to where the man was still trying to crawl toward the steps down to a small shop with the sign, *Del Floria's Cleaners & Tailors.* He walked slowly, letting the wounded man crawl. He raised his pistol again.

The shot never came.

From a doorway at the top of the brownstone stoop above *Del Floria's* another man materialized. This man, too, held a pistol, a strange-looking weapon.

He was a slender man of medium height with neat, dark brown hair. He looked like a young executive, a rising young doctor, perhaps an athletic playboy still young enough to be in good condition. He wore a conservative business suit, and looked like a thou-

sand bright young men of business in the great city. He was none of these things.

His name was Napoleon Solo, and he shot the heavy man in the dress suit.

Puh!

A single spitting sound even fainter than the three shots earlier from the silenced pistols.

The heavy man was not knocked down; there was no blood. The dress-suited killer merely looked once at Solo, tried to raise his gun, and slid to the concrete.

Solo moved down the steps and out into the street with catlike speed. Incongruously, an easy smile played across his almost handsome face.

"Your guns, gentlemen, if you please," Solo said, smiling at the two remaining men in dress suits.

The two men raised their guns, fired wildly. Solo dove for cover. His pistol was up and aimed. The two men turned to run.

Directly in front of them, in the middle of the dark city street, there was now still another man. This man was small, slender, his Slavic face crowned by an unruly thatch of blond hair cut like the round-bowl haircut of some ancient knight-errant. His bright eyes were shrewd beneath an habitually lowered brow as he watched the three men in the dress suits.

He seemed to have risen from the concrete itself, come up out of the earth. He watched the surprised killers with a quizzical expression.

"I think you should do as the man said," Illya Kuryakin said. "It's polite, you know."

The two men recovered from their shock, raised their pistols, and the blond man, Illya, shot them both.

Puh. . . puh!

They slid to the ground.

Illya did not look at them again. The small blond agent of U.N.C.L.E. walked quickly over them to where Napoleon Solo was already bending over the man they had shot. This man had stopped crawling. Solo had turned him over, and he lay now on his back with his eyes closed. Illya looked down at the shot man.

"He's alive," Solo said. "But he won't be."

"Diaz," Illya said, speaking down to the man. "Diaz, can you talk? Why—"

The wounded man, Fernando Diaz, agent for U.N.C.L.E. Section II, New York, opened his eyes. He stared up, dying, at the face of his Chief Enforcement Agent, Napoleon Solo. His lips moved, his tongue moved.

But no sound came.

"Diaz?" Solo said softly. "Speak slowly."

The man opened his mouth again. Strained, eyes bulging, the cords on his neck thick with effort.

There was no sound from his open mouth.

Not a groan, not a word, not a whisper...

Diaz fell back, breathed irregularly. Then his hand began to move. Illya reached into his pocket. The blond agent took out a small notebook and a pencil. He handed them to Diaz. The fallen agent barely nodded, took the pencil and notebook.

The pencil drew lines on the paper, circles. Diaz blinked, looked up. Solo showed him the paper with the meaningless scrawls. Diaz tried again. On the paper there was nothing but lines and small circles.

Diaz dropped the pencil, dropped the notebook. He choked, blood welling up in his throat. His eyes dilated, showed for one instant a small fear. Then he raised his hand. Finger extended, he pointed at the sky. His hand moved in the dark air, fluttered like a bird. He smiled and died.

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin stood there for some minutes, looking down at the dead man. Then they holstered their guns and bent to pick him up. They carried him into Del Floria's cleaning shop, into a rear dressing room, and through the wall into the clean, hospital-like corridors of the headquarters of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement.

Behind them other men had appeared to carry in the three fallen killers.

TWO

THE ALARMS had stopped now in the bright, windowless corridors of U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters. Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin, Chief and Number 2 man in U.N.C.L.E. Section II—Operations and Enforcement in New York, hurried in grim silence along the vaultlike corridors, past the closed and silent doors.

In its silence and anonymous efficiency, the complex of U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, as impregnable as a fortress, could have been anywhere on earth or a thousand miles underground. Here there was no evidence of the city outside, or of the innocent seeming brownstones on the street. There was no evidence from inside of the four known entrances, nor of the tunnels out to the East River, one of which Illya Kuryakin had used to make his seemingly miraculous appearance in the street through an ordinary manhole.

There is a fifth entrance to U.N.C.L.E. in New York, but that is known only to the man Illya and Solo were hurrying to meet now. The last door in the corridor opened automatically, the two agents having been thoroughly scanned and identified electronically, and they passed through into

the office of Alexander Waverly, the only Western Hemisphere member of Section-I, Policy and Operations, and their chief.

Waverly, one of only five Section-I members in the world-wide operations of U.N.C.L.E., was not a man who stood on formality. An aristocratic, tweedy, unsmiling and slow-speaking man with iron-grey hair, Waverly was matter-of-fact and given to absent-mindedness on small matters.

"Mr.—uh—Solo, Kuryakin," Waverly said, blinking as he remembered the names of his two best agents. "Sit down. I trust you have examined Diaz?"

Solo and Illya sat down at the circular revolving table and faced their superior. Waverly began to look for a match to light the pipe in his mouth. As the bushy-browed chief searched his pockets for the matches, he continued to speak in his unruffled manner.

"The three men you quieted with your sleep darts have revealed nothing, I fear. Typical Thrush agents, of course—no fingerprints, no identification."

"How about using our super-pentathol on them," Solo said.

Waverly nodded, finding his matches. "We'll try it, of course, but I think with little result. They appear to be the usual Thrush assassins. No knowledge of any operations, and with no reasons given to them for their particular job. These three are so low they did not even have the remote-destruct charge under their skins."

"But they killed Diaz," Illya said grimly.

"Yes," Waverly said, "they killed Diaz. Most unfortunate. Did you find anything on his body that would help us learn why?"

Waverly was not callous or inhuman. Diaz had been a good agent and a good man, but the work of U.N.C.L.E. in battling

the cruelty and evil of the world did not allow its leaders the luxury of sentiment or even compassion. All U.N.C.L.E. agents knew the risk, and took that risk in full knowledge. They did not expect tears, only the continuance of the work they died for.

"Nothing," Solo said. "And they had no time to search him, so he had to be bringing a verbal message."

Waverly nodded, lighted his pipe now, and puffed slowly. Illya and Solo looked at each other. They had come to the important point. Waverly opened the subject

that was now on all of their minds.

"He could neither speak nor write?" Waverly said.

"Not a sound, and not a letter on paper," Illya said. "He tried. It was almost frightening to watch him."

"He couldn't make a sound with his voice, but he could hold the pencil," Solo said. "He just couldn't write words."

"I simply don't understand it," Illya said. "He seemed to be in perfect possession of all his other faculties. There must be an explanation."

Waverly said, "What does the laboratory show?"

Solo shrugged. "A blank. No discoverable reason for it at all. The bullets were perfectly normal. No trace of a drug."

Illya leaned forward across the circular table. "There was no reason they could find, not in a complete autopsy. But Diaz could neither speak nor write."

Waverly nodded. A thoughtful expression crossed his craggy, bloodhoundlike face. The Section-I leader puffed on his pipe, allowing the smoke ot rise slowly to the ceiling of the sunny room that could have been the office of any slightly over-age college professor, except for the banks of electronic equipment that kept Waverly in instant touch with his own headquarters, and with the world.

"Therefore, we must look elsewhere, I should say," Waverly said simply. "I expect we will find our reason for this, shall we say, 'unspeakable' affair, when we learn what Diaz knew."

"And just how do we do that?" Solo asked.

Waverly looked unsmiling at his chief agent. "That I believe will be up to you, Mr.—Solo. Yes, I think this is a task for your particular talents. You will take over Diaz's work immediately."

"Someday I'll learn not to ask questions," Solo said.

"Perhaps there will be a beautiful lady to compensate for the apparently short life span, Napoleon," Illya said, and smiled.

"One lives in hope, my fine Russian friend," Solo retorted.

Waverly coughed. "I don't imagine there will be much opportunity for your well-known hobby, Mr. Solo. Beautiful women are notoriously scarce on rocket bases, I hear. Especially on secret bases."

"Montana?" Solo and Illya said together.

"Yes, Montana. The Elk River Project. Diaz was going there from New Mexico ten days ago. We had a report to that effect from him. Apparently he arrived, checked into the nearest motel, and then vanished. His appearance on our street was a complete surprise to me."

"Why did he go to Elk River?" Solo asked.

Waverly puffed on his pipe. "It seems there are two rocket pilots

there, test pilots for United States experimental rocket aircraft, who have fallen ill of a strange malady. A secret report went to Washington, and Washington saw fit to call us in. Wisely, I think."

"A malady?" Solo said.

"Apparently," Waverly said.

Illya leaned forward. The Slavic face of the small Russian was intense with excitement.

"They can neither speak nor write," Illya said. "Is that the malady?"

Waverly sighed. "I'm afraid it is. Diaz is the third case of unspeaking, not the first."

THREE

NAPOLEON SOLO whistled soundlessly, his boyish face showing neither fear nor caution, but only a certain surprise. Illya hunched forward and watched Waverly.

"Washington was disturbed, naturally," Waverly said. "They will be a bit more disturbed when they learn that their malady appears to involve our old adversary Thrush."

"And Diaz was working on the malady of un-speaking?" Illya said.

"No, not precisely," Waverly said.

"But you said—" Solo began to protest.

Waverly blew smoke. "I said, Mr. Solo, that Diaz had gone to Elk River from New Mexico. His actual assignment was something quite different. You have heard of UFOs, of course? Unidentified flying objects?"

"Who hasn't?" Solo said. "Half the crackpots in the world have seen them, and the other half have ridden in them to Venus."

"Only a very small percentage are actually unidentified after investigation," Illya said.

"Approximately one percent, to be precise," Waverly said.

"Small enough to be explained by simple chance, lack of accurate information," Illya said.

Waverly nodded. "I quite agree. But what would you say to ten percent?"

"Ten percent?" Illya said, his eyes narrowing.

"Exactly," Waverly said. "The percentage has suddenly risen in the last six months. Of all reported sightings, some ten percent have not yet been explained."

"That's statistically impossible," Illya cried, "unless—"

"Yes, Mr. Kuryakin?" Waverly said, unsmiling.

"Unless we are being invaded from outer space," Illya said.

Waverly rubbed his chin. "We can't rule that out. It could very well be such an invasion, I'm afraid."

There was a long silence in the sunny office. Illya and Solo looked at each other. Both their faces registered sheer disbelief. Waverly

seemed to have forgotten them for the moment. The U.N.C.L.E. leader was lost in thought. It was Napoleon Solo who spoke first.

"You really can't be serious, Chief?"

Waverly blinked. "What? Oh, yes, Mr. Solo, I fear I am. We are dealing with true unidentified objects, which means they could be from anywhere."

"Just how many is ten percent?" Solo asked.

"Four, Mr. Solo," Waverly said. "There have been forty reported sightings all over the world in the last six months."

"Do we know what they were like, the four unidentified objects flying around?" Illya said.

"As it happens, we do," Waverly said. "Long and quite thin. They appeared to be painted black, unlike most such sightings, which are invariably silver colored. They also glowed, as if red-hot, and moved with incredible speed. Fast enough so that no one could get a really good look at them."

Illya was puzzled. "You make it sound as if all four were identical."

"They were," Waverly said. "Absolutely identical. And at least two were seen by extremely reliable people." Waverly looked at his two agents. "You can see why we are rather concerned. They seem a trifle too real."

"Is there any pattern, any correlation about where they were seen?" Solo said.

"Yes, a very simple pattern—all four were seen over New Mexico, near Santa Maestre, a small town at the edge of the Navaho Reservation."

Both Illya and Napoleon Solo studied Mr. Waverly as if certain that their chief was playing some kind of joke on them. When Waverly did not blink or change his serious expression, the two agents looked at each other again.

"I see you've grasped the significance," Waverly said drily. "That was why we sent Diaz to New Mexico to investigate. He had little luck. That he reported. But when we called him about the two rocket pilots who were unable to speak, he seemed really excited."

"He thought there was a connection?" Solo said.

"He did, and so do I," Waverly said. "Both of the sick men are rocket pilots. The connection would appear obvious. I think Diaz believed they were faking the inability to speak, but he had no chance to report, obviously. So I am afraid it is now up to you gentlemen."

Solo grinned. "It's my job to go to Elk River, find out what Diaz learned and how he lost his speech, and try not to lose mine."

"I should say that would be approximately correct," Waverly said drily.

"You don't want me to accompany Napoleon?" Illya said.

"No, Mr. Kuryakin."

Illya sighed. "Which means that it is New Mexico for me, and I hate the heat."

Waverly was unsympathetic. "We all must make our sacrifices, Mr. Kuryakin. I suggest you both arm yourselves well, seeing what happened to Mr. Diaz, and we'll set up a relay so that you can keep in touch with each other. And one more thing, Mr. Kuryakin.

"I suggest you begin your search at a village called Noche Triste, on the Navaho Reservation. It seems they had a mysterious explosion a mile from the village. Large hole in the ground, considerable noise, and a very high radiation count."

"Nuclear radiation?" Solo said.

"Very," Waverly said. "The Navaho medicine man attributed it to the indigestion of some god. But I think that an unlikely explanation."

"I tend to agree with you, sir," Illya said.

The two agents left their chief staring into space, already concerned with some other problem that had been placed in the hands of U.N.C.L.E.

They dressed and armed themselves. Solo dressed in a well-cut suit; he would go to Elk River as Mr. Roger Raille of the United States State Department, a cover already prepared by Washington.

Illya wore old clothes. Black, fit

for hot work in the deserts of New Mexico. Both carried small briefcases Illya's containing a specially sensitive miniature Geiger counter, which fitted his role as a uranium prospector.

Their jets left at the same time from Idlewild, but they slipped out of U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters separately. It was a sensible precaution.

FOUR

NAPOLEON SOLO saw the two men run for a car that pulled out into the night traffic and followed Illya's taxi down the East Side street. He ducked into a doorway and took out the thin ballpoint pen that was not a pen at all

but a miniature radio sender-receiver. The latest U.N.C.L.E. communications improvement, he held it to his lips and whispered.

"Bubba! This is Sonny. Mayday. Over. Repeat, Mayday."

The new instrument, developed by Section-IV, had an increased range of ten miles over the old sets. Almost instantly, the voice of Illya answered.

"Sonny, Bubba here."

Solo leaned over the tiny instrument. His eyes watched the dark street as he talked.

"Bandits on your trail. Two bandits in a black Mercedes. License begins with XB 12, three other digits I missed."

There was a silence. Solo listened intently in his hidden doorway. Then Illya's cool voice came over the radio again.

"I have them, just behind me, three cars back. Thanks, Napoleon."

"Be careful," Solo said into the tiny pencil set.

"Have no fear, and be careful yourself. I rather doubt our friends came alone."

"Roger," Solo said. "Meet at the BOAC information booth. They'll think we're going abroad."

"Right and out. I see my friends gaining on me."

In his dark doorway, Napoleon Solo replaced his radio-pen in his suit pocket. His keen eyes scanned the empty street. Illya was undoubtedly correct. If they had two men waiting to trail Illya, they had probably not neglected him. The difference was that he was warned.

He studied the dark street intently, noting every detail. He knew every car, every face, every shadow that moved or lurked on the street. One car, an old Cadillac, caught his eye. He did not remember seeing the Cadillac before on the street. It appeared empty and innocent. But Solo saw something else that made him smile to himself.

On the steps of the brownstone near the old Cadillac he saw a man and a woman. They appeared to be lovers dallying innocently with each other on the steps, with eyes and thoughts only for each other. Even as he watched they embraced, and he realized that they could see him clearly in his doorway.

They were putting on an act because they saw him watching them —and there was only one way they could have seen him where he was hidden in the dark shadows of the doorway. Infra-red glasses, or the infra-red scope-sights of a Thrush rifle! He flattened back against the wall.

But no shot came. Either he was wanted alive, or else they were not ready to shoot.

Solo smiled. He would have to see that they did not get another chance. And if they wanted him alive, then he wanted them alive. He peered out, carefully. They

were still playing the lovers, the man and woman across the street on the steps.

He stepped out of his shelter and hurried away down the dark street.

At the corner he glanced back, so quickly no one could have seen him.

The Cadillac was moving along behind him.

Still smiling, he sprinted along the wide avenue he had turned into. The Cadillac came around the corner behind him, speeded up. He ran across another cross street until he reached a shabby tavern on the avenue. The Cadillac was close now.

Solo let it come very close, watching it out of the corner of his eye. Then, as if seeing the Cadillac and panicking, he looked wildly around, and dashed into the seedy tavern.

Inside the tavern the six or seven dilapidated customers at the long bar did not even look up. They held their drinks in both hands, stared into the depths of the whisky or at their own faces in the mirror behind the bar. They were long past caring about anything that moved, cared only for the small glasses of golden liquid in front of them.

Solo dashed through the long, dirty room with its gaudy signs that advertised the various beers and whiskies, and no one noticed —except the bartender and two drunks sitting in a booth near the door.

The bartender turned and touched a key on the cash register. Then the bartender reached under the bar and his hidden hand held a strange-looking pistol that was a twin of the pistol in Solo's Berns-Martin shoulder holster.

The two drunks in the booth near the door did not change noticeably, but one of them staggered to his feet and lurched across to the bar. He leaned there, asking drunkenly for a drink. The eyes of both drunks seemed lost in some bleary dream world. They were not. They were alert, watchful, and now there was one flanking each side of the door.

Solo went through the room without a glance at anyone, turned once to look back as if in fear. Then he vanished into the men's room. In the men's room he stepped to a section of wall and pulled a hook that was fixed on the wall for hanging clothes.

The wall opened, the mechanism activated by the bartender touching the cash register key out front. Solo stepped through. The door closed automatically, locked.

Solo stood in a small room that contained a table and two chairs, a rack of weapons for emergencies, and a small television set. Solo switched on the television. Instantly he saw a view of the street in front of the shabby-looking tavern. The Cadillac was no-

where in sight, but a shadowy figure stood only a few feet from the door.

Solo smiled. The missing Cadillac was what he had expected. He pressed a button on the television set and another picture appeared. Now it was the side street, where the alley behind the bar came out.

Another shadowy figure stood there, watching the mouth of the alley.

He switched to the third camera. The Cadillac was parked in the dark of the next avenue behind the tavern. Somewhere they had picked up a third or even fourth man, probably hidden on the floor of the Cadillac all the time.

They had covered all exits.

Solo grinned to himself in the hidden room. That anyone trailing an agent would have the sense to cover all exits was precisely what U.N.C.L E. expected and planned for. This room, one of the many escape routes involved in perpetual Plan 9, was designed to enable an agent to evade any shadower.

The routes, the locations, were changed every few days, of course. Tomorrow this would be only a tavern again.

Solo switched back to the camera that covered the front entrance. The shadowy figure out there suddenly moved, came into the light from the tavern windows. A woman who held a small, deadly pistol—a woman Solo knew only too well. Maxine Trent!

A Maxine Trent returned from the dead—but Solo had never believed that the high-ranking Thrush agent was dead. Maxine was too deadly to die easily. Maxine was no low-rated assassin. U.N.C.L.E. could use her alive, and now she was walking into the trap. He quickly switched to the other cameras—they were all closing in on the tavern.

He pressed a tiny button on the table. The warning light would flash out front where the bartender could see it. The rest was in the hands of Section-V, Security and Personnel. His own orders were standard and strict—the job came first; he had to make his escape.

In the hidden room he stepped to a closet, opened it, went in, closed the door and pressed the switch. The closet began to move downward, a small elevator that stopped at the sub-basement level. The door opened and Solo stood in a narrow tunnel.

Minutes later he was four blocks away, out in the night, hailing a taxi.

FIVE

ILLYA KURYAKIN leaned forward in his taxi and spoke softly to the driver.

"I think we are being followed, driver. I suggest you attempt to lose them. It is me they want, but they

would be reluctant to leave a witness alive, I'm afraid."

The driver, a small man, cast a frightened glance behind him at Illya. The small Russian smiled his most reassuring smile. The driver saw the pistol in the agent's hand and his eyes bulged. Then the driver faced front, watched his mirror, and began to weave in and out of the airport-bound traffic.

After ten minutes, Illya saw that it was no use. The taxi driver was not trained in evading pursuit. He, Illya, would have to resort to more direct methods. And he would have to pick his own ground, not their ground. He leaned forward again.

"At the next street make a left, driver. Drive as fast as you can. We will be on a side street and they will close in."

The driver nodded, made the sharp left, barely missing an oncoming car, and drove fast down the darker side street. Illya looked behind. The black Mercedes was already behind them and gaining.

Illya narrowed his eyes and made a rapid mental estimate. He nodded; they would reach the area of open swamps that bordered Jamaica Bay before the Mercedes could catch them.

It would be close, but that was just what the blond agent wanted. Close, but not too close. He clicked his pistol on to bullets, and bent to his small suitcase. He came up with two tiny round pellets. Then he waited.

The taxi reached the deserted area of marsh and reeds and dark black water. The road had become a dirt road. The Mercedes raced closer behind.

"When I give the signal, slow down. When I'm out, drive away as fast as you can. Go to this address, and you will be well paid. Report what happened."

The driver nodded and took the piece of paper Illya gave him with the address of Del Floria's cleaning shop on it. The taxi drove on into the depths of the marshy shore. The houses were far behind now; to the left and right deep, wide channels of black water led in from the open bay.

The Mercedes was less than fifty yards behind and coming fast.

Illya leaned out the window and tossed both small round pellets onto the road behind the taxi. Two dense clouds of white smoke erupted in the night. In an instant the Mercedes vanished from sight behind the clouds of smoke that merged and covered the road.

"Now!" Illya hissed.

The driver braked, skidded, slowed. Illya opened the door and jumped out. He hit, fell, rolled, and came up on his feet with his U.N.C.L.E. special in one hand and the small suitcase in the other. The taxi roared off into the night.

Illya crouched at the side of the road, his U.N.C.L.E. special ready and pointed at the cloud of smoke. The Mercedes should come through

any second, burst out of the smoke, eager, unaware, and partly blinded.

The Mercedes did not come.

Illya waited, watched.

The Mercedes did not come. There was no more sound of its powerful engine.

Illya waited no longer. The trick had not worked. He did not hesitate another second. He turned and ran away from the road toward the marshes and the black channel of foul water that led in from the bay.

He moved not a second too soon.

As he ran, a man came through the smoke, his strange rifle held ready, its infra-red scope bulky above the barrel. A second man came from around the right side of the dissipating smoke cloud.

Both men wore grotesque gas masks, the large round eyepieces making them look like monsters risen from the swampy land itself.

The third man appeared almost directly in Illya's path around the left side of the thinning smoke. This man also wore a gas mask and carried the ugly Thrush rifle.

The two men Napoleon Solo had seen, and a driver.

Illya and the Thrush killer saw each other at the same insant. Illya was quicker. He fired a single shot. The Thrush agent sprawled backwards in the mud and lay still. Behind Illya, the other two Thrush men began to run toward him. They fired as they came.

Illya raced away across the marsh, his feet sinking to the ankles, his face slashed by the tall reeds. He found a narrow ditch, half-filled with water, and jumped into it. Behind him the two Thrush men closed in. He raised his U.N.C.L.E. special and laid down a withering fire.

The two Thrush agents vanished.

Illya crouched low in the ditch and waited again. His keen eyes glanced carefully around. The ditch stretched straight in both directions and he was surrounded by the tall, dry reeds. They could not come on him by surprise through the ditch, and if they came through the reeds he would hear.

But they had no intention of moving in.

First he heard the crackling, like the snapping of many small sticks.

Then he smelled the smoke. The flames licked upward in the night. They had set the reeds afire. Instantly, with some chemical—a favorite weapon of Thrush.

Illya tested the wind. It blew not strong but directly toward him. He stood. The now high wall of flame, roaring toward him with incredible speed as the dry reeds burned, hid him from the two killers. He looked all around.

They had set the fire well, probably with bombs. There was no escape right or left.

Behind him was the deep black water of the channel from the sea.

He could swim it with ease, but he would be a perfect target when the fire burned out, and that would be within minutes. He had no time to think of any plan but one.

He bent to his small suitcase, jerked it open, and pulled out a small, flat package.

The flames rose higher in the night. The heat was intense, growing hotter.

He tore open the small package and unfolded a long thin sheetlike cloth cover. He crouched down in the water at the bottom of the ditch, and covered himself with the thin, shining cloth. The ends of the cloth dipped into the water. Under it, his head above the surface of water in the small space beneath the cloth where there was air, he waited.

The sound of the fire roared in his ears. The thin cover blew in the wind made by the intense heat. He held it down and crouched, the heat stifling, like an oven. He could see the shadows of the flames above through the thin cloth—sheets of flame that leaped across the narrow ditch, roasting, charring everything in their path.

But the special fire-proof and heat-proof cloth did not fail. Slowly, above him, the flames vanished, passed on. Wind died, the crackling stopped.

Quickly he threw off the cloth and flattened up against the wall of the small ditch. They would not be far behind their fire. Already the flames were almost gone, burned out at the edge of the black channel of water.

Footsteps coming steadily.

They reached the ditch and looked down, looked for his dead and charred body.

Illya shot them both before they could speak a single word.

They tumbled into the ditch.

In the distance he heard the sirens approaching. Someone had reported the fire. He jumped from the ditch and ran back to the road. The Mercedes stood abandoned on the road. He ran to it. The keys were still there. He jumped in and drove off toward Idlewild.

The fire engines and police cars were in sight, but he had no time to waste. Thrush was very anxious that no one reach New Mexico or Elk River.

* * *

IN FRONT of the shabby tavern on the avenue near U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, Maxine Trent studied the entrance. Her men at the side and rear reported that no one had left the tavern. And yet she knew Solo would not have waited this long. Her beautiful face was thoughtful. She reached into her handbag and took out a compact. She pressed a button on the compact.

"Trent ordering. Make your attack."

She clicked off her transmitter and slid back into the shadows of the avenue. She waited. A minute passed, two minutes. Then there were four shots. And silence. The shots had come from the alley behind the tavern. She clocked on her transmitter compact.

"Trent ordering. Report!"

She waited. There was no response. Inside the shabby tavern all was quiet, normal. She began to smile. A trap, of course. One of good old U.N.C.L.E.'s Plan 9 fronts. She turned quickly and walked away down the avenue. She glanced behind her and saw the bartender of the seedy tavern standing out in front.

She smiled again, laughed a harsh, cold laugh. Well, two men lost, but you had to break eggs to make an omelette. They had been lousy men anyway. And she had located an U.N.C.L.E. front, not that it would still be there tomorrow. But it caused U.N.C.L.E. trouble, and that was both her job and a pleasure.

Solo would not trap her so easily any more. She had many a score to settle with the handsome U.N.C.L.E. agent. It was unfortunate that he was what he was; she rather liked him, he was so very handsome and virile.

Maxine sighed. It would have been so good to have him make love to her. It was really too bad he would have to die sooner or later.

She continued to walk, smiling at the way she had guessed the trap. She had missed Solo again, but one had to lose some battles. It was the war that counted, and

she would win the war. She was quite sure of that. She, and Thrush, would win because U.N.C.L.E., for all its skill and power, still worked with principles of right and wrong, and for Thrush only victory was right. Right and wrong did not exist, only winners and losers, and Maxine was going to be a winner.

She found a drugstore open and stepped into the telephone booth.

"Yes?" a deep, cold voice said.

"Number four, Row sixteen, Circle three and come in on forty-two," Maxine said crisply.

"Your report, Agent four sixteen dash three forty-two. Name?" the deep voice said from the other end of the line.

"Trent, Maxine."

"Proceed, Agent Trent," the deep voice said.

SIX

THE ROOM did not exist. The building was on Park Avenue in the upper Sixties, a modern office complex of steel and glass where giants of industry sat in their suites and conducted the business of the nation. In this suite, there were six rooms, only five visible, only five listed on the floor plan. The sixth room did not exist.

Windowless, without doors, soundproof, and ventilated only by a secret, totally impregnable, air-conditioning system, the room was the silent home of a machine. A complex of metal and wheels and flashing lights—The Ultimate Computer, the heart of Thrush. One of the homes of the machine, it remained in no single place for long.

Now, in the room with the machine, in a silence of a tomb, three men sat waiting. Soon a fourth man appeared as if by magic through the wall. This fourth man walked to an empty seat.

"Trent reports Napoleon Solo escaped her," the man said. "Our men sent after Illya Kuryakin have also failed. Both Solo and Kuryakin were seen meeting at the BOAC booth at Idlewild."

"They are not going overseas," the man at the head of the table said. This man was a well-known businessman, and the suite of offices nestled around the hidden room was his. He was also "C" of the Council of Thrush.

"No," a tall, gaunt man said. "They are not going overseas. What does the computer say?"

The fourth man, the one who had entered last, and who was Council Member C's assistant, spoke deferentially to the tall, gaunt man.

"The computer reports, Council Member L, that on the basis of Diaz's death Alexander Waverly will connect Elk River and New Mexico. It says, further, that Waverly will not guess the exact nature of the New Mexico project until he learns more details of the explosion."

There was a hollow laugh from a small, fat man who was the last man in this hidden room. "Do we need a machine to tell us those things? I am surprised."

"The machine makes us certain, Dr. Guerre," the tall, gaunt Council Member L said. "Go on with your report."

"The computer says that Waverly will send Solo to Elk River, and Kurayakin to New Mexico. Our field agents have already been alerted. The computer further says that Solo cannot discover what he wants at Elk River, but that Kuryakin might discover the New Mexico operation."

"Good," Council Member C said. "Then we must concentrate on the death of Kuryakin at once. Solo can wait."

"Kill them both at once," Dr. Guerre, the small, fat man said. "That is the only safe way. The devil with your computer! I must have no interference. I am in the crucial stage of the project at the island. I must get back, and I want them dead!"

"They will die, Dr. Guerre, but it is efficient to kill the more dangerous first," Council Member C said.

"The devil with your efficiency!" Guerre roared. For such a small man, his voice had the power of a giant. "Diaz almost fooled you and ruined the whole work, the most important work we have ever done! With Operation Condor we will have all the world begging to be ruled by us!"

Council Member C smiled. "Almost, Doctor, but not quite. He fooled our people at Elk River, but he did not fool the computer."

"Luck! Even your computer would have been too late if Diaz had not been unaware of the side effects of the stabilizer drug! How did he worm his way into our confidence?"

"That error has been eliminated, Dr. Guerre."

"I hope so. Those men will be out of the side effects today; we must be sure they are reliable. I must get back to the island."

Council Member C smiled. "They could not betray us and live if they wanted to."

"Then let us hope they do not want to betray us," Dr. Guerre said. "We need them. In Condor, the men are almost as important as the machines."

The gaunt Council Member L looked coldly at Dr. Guerre. "I have guaranteed that Thrush Council will give you complete security and material, I guarantee success. Do not insult me with your doubts. But I agree on one point: we must get back. I will be missed."

"Then I suggest we start work," Council Member C said.

The tall man bristled. "You suggest? You? May I remind you that this is my project, Council Member?"

"Of course, Council Member. I

merely meant my part, the defeat of U.N.C.L.E. here in the American phase."

"Very well," the tall Council Member L said. "As long as it is understood that Condor is my project."

There was a low chuckle. They all turned to look at the small, fat Dr. Guerre. His benign, almost jolly, face beamed around the silent and secret room.

"No, gentlemen, it is my project. Condor is mine, the child of *my* brain. Thrush may rule the world—I care nothing of that—but it will be my brain that brought it to pass!"

And the fat little man beamed like some rotund and too friendly small-town businessman.

A round little cherub smiling innocently at the stern faces around him.

ACT II
WHIZZ-BANG IN THE NIGHT

NAPOLEON SOLO presented his credentials at the reception desk of the Elk River Project. The pretty young receptionist checked his identity picture against his face. She saw a boyishly handsome young man with a small black mustache and horn-rimmed glasses.

The boyish face smiled at her. It was not an innocent smile. The pretty receptionist blushed and passed him on.

Solo grinned to himself and looked back. The girl, who had been watching him walk away, blushed again. Solo filed her face, and the name on her desk, Miss Rogers, for possible future reference. Perhaps this would not be quite as dull an assignment as Alexander Waverly had suggested.

Still thinking about the possibilities of the nubile Miss Rogers, Solo entered the office of Elk River Security Officer Max Smart. The security officer was a husky six-footer, and he was not pleased to see Solo. Smart had been expecting the U.N.C.L.E. agent, but he did not know who Solo was, or that he was Solo. Smart thought he was talking to Roger Raille, representative of the State Department.

"Damned if I know what State wants here, Raille," the husky security officer said. "But you might as well sit down."

"Thank you," Solo said.

Smart chewed on a cold cigar. "I mean, damn it, we've got a smooth operation here, strictly Space and Pentagon. I don't like other departments poking in."

"I just follow orders, Mr. Smart," Solo said.

"Meaning that I should do that, too?"

"It seems a reasonable suggestion," Solo said.

"Don't get too wise with me, Raille," Smart snapped.

Solo smiled. "The State Department never gets wise, Mr. Smart."

"Major, Raille! Major Smart to you," the security officer said.

Smart chewed on his soggy cigar. "I might as well get it over and get rid of you. You want to know about Caslow and Wozlak, right?"

"Right," Solo said.

Smart swiveled in his chair. "Okay, here it is. Captain Caslow and Lieutenant Commander Wolzak are two of our test pilots, experimental rocket craft, and that's all you get to know. Top secret. About two weeks ago they came down with this illness. They couldn't talk, make any sound, and they couldn't write. The docs were baffled, and that's it."

Major Smart looked at Solo as if he was more than pleased to be able to tell him so little. Solo sighed inside. The problems of inter-service rivalry had caused him trouble before. Sometimes it seemed that professional service men spent a lot more time trying to beat their rivals instead of the enemy.

"The doctors had no bright ideas?" Solo asked.

"Some," Smart said. "Some effect of cosmic radiation, possibly. Perhaps an effect of the high speed, much faster than any other craft ever flew. Glandular disturbances affecting that area of the brain. Some combination of, say, radiation that high up plus the speed. They had a hundred guesses."

"With, I gather, no results?" Solo said.

"Not so as you could notice," Smart said.

"Any ideas of your own?"

The major shook his head. "No, except that we just don't know everything that can happen at high speed up that high. Anyway, they're okay now, so no sweat."

Solo narrowed his sharp eyes. "They're well again? They can talk, write?"

"Good as new," Smart said. "They go back to work in a week."

"I think I better talk to them," Solo said.

"I've told you all there is."

"Orders, remember?" Solo said.

The security officer glared at Solo. The U.N.C.L.E. agent smiled benignly. Finally, Major Smart shrugged, sighed, and pressed a button on his desk. A white-helmeted MP appeared.

"Take Mr. Raille to the infirmary. He's to talk with Caslow and Wozlak. Ten minutes, no more. See to it, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir," the MP sergeant said. And to Solo, "This way, sir."

Solo nodded to Major Smart. "It's been fun."

The Security Officer only glared at him. Solo grinned as he followed the MP sergeant. They went down bright corridors until they reached the door marked *Infirmary*. Solo was taken by a white-coated Army doctor into the private room of Caslow and Wozlak.

"Amazing timing," the doctor said as he ushered Solo into the private room. "Absolutely no explanation that we could find. Oh, we know it was something that af-

fected only that particular part of the brain—the speech and language part—but we can't get a clue as to why."

But Solo was not listening to the doctor. He was looking at the two men who sat on their separate beds, their eyes on him. They were dressed in the usual Army hospital bathrobes, but it was not their dress that made him look at them so hard. It was their eyes—they were wary, a little afraid of him.

The doctor introduced them, and Solo waited until he left the room. Then he turned to the two men.

"What can you tell me?" Solo said.

Wozlak shrugged. "Nothing. All we know is that we woke up about two weeks ago and we couldn't speak or write, not even our names. Last night it went away. You tell me."

"You must have some idea," Solo insisted. "Something that happened that was unusual."

"Not a clue," Caslow said. "Nothing happened at all."

They were lying. Solo sensed this. He could not say just why he knew it, or what the lie was, but he felt that they were lying.

"Nothing at all unusual happened?"

"No," they said in unison.

"What do you know about a man named Diaz?" Solo snapped.

It was Caslow who blinked. Solo watched him. There was no doubt, the name had meant something to Caslow. Wozlak covered for both of them.

"Diaz? Nothing, I don't know any Diaz. And that's all we can tell you, Mr. Raille."

"I see," Solo said. "You're sure about that?"

"We're sure," Wozlak said.

Solo nodded. "All right, I'll just have to report a blank to the State Department."

He was sure. Wozlak smiled. "I guess you will. Anyway, it's over now. We're okay."

"Nice and safe," Solo said.

Wozlak nodded as he looked straight at Napoleon Solo. Caslow licked his lips. The Army man was nervous. But Wozlak did not flinch.

"Safe as we can be," Wozlak said.

Outside in the corridor, Solo stopped to think. The MP sergeant was down at the end of the corridor, talking to a pretty nurse. Solo was about to go and remind the sergeant of his duty, when he heard the noise.

He snapped alert.

A low, hissing sound.

Without moving, or showing that he had heard it, he let his eyes search the bare corridor for the sound.

It came again, *"Psssst!"*

Just behind him Solo saw a door open a crack. His hand stole under his jacket for his U.N.C.L.E. special. There was a face at the small opening in the door.

"*Psssst*! In here!"

The voice whispered low. Solo glanced down the corridor. The MP was still in deep conversation with the pretty nurse. The rest of the corridor was empty. His hand on his pistol, Solo stepped to the door and entered.

He stood in a small storeroom. The voice that had hissed at him belonged to a woman. A girl—really, a very pretty girl. He had momentary hopes that it was him she wanted, for himself. But the girl had something else on her mind.

"You're not from the State Department," the girl said.

Solo clicked off the safety on his Special. The girl was quite young and very pretty. She wore a white smock, and her hair was dark red. Her green eyes were staring up at him.

"Why do you say that?" Solo asked.

"I know you have a gun under your coat, and you don't act like a State Department man," the girl said. "Besides, you asked questions about Diaz. I'm Penny Parsons—Penelope, but I hate the name."

"And just what do you do here, Penny?"

"In the lab, research assistant. I'm terribly bright, you know. Magna cum laude from Cal Tech."

"Good for you," Solo said. "Now what about Diaz?"

"He vanished. I don't know why, but I do know he was working on a case for someone. He asked me a lot of questions," the girl said.

"Why you?"

"I'm Mark Caslow's girl, or I was," Penny said. "It was a sceret. The powers around here don't like romance among the minions."

"What did you tell Diaz?" Solo said slowly.

"That they are lying," Penny Parsons said eagerly. "Mark and that Wozlak are lying in their teeth. A lot has been happening that's not usual. On half their flights they stay away hours too long. They always report that they had some troubles with the new engines up there, but Mark got drunk one night and let it slip. They've been landing somewhere. In New Mexico, I think."

"New Mexico?"

"They can fly there in minutes," Penny said.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Off and on since they got back from vacation six months ago."

Solo released his hold on his pistol in the holster under his coat. "Vacation? They went on vacation six months ago?"

"And they were overdue on their test flights by four hours the day they turned up un-speaking!"

"Where did they take their vacations?"

The girl looked around, whispered. "In Santa Fe. At least they said it was Santa Fe, but they

weren't there! I went to surprise Mark. I never told him. They checked into a motel at Santa Fe, and then they vanished."

Solo closed the door of the store room. He stepped closer to the girl. Her eyes were bright and eager as she began to whisper her whole story again.

TWO

ILLYA HAD almost reached Noche Triste when the car had the flat tire. He had landed at Santa Fe, and hired the car at once. He told the car-rental people he was looking for uranium, and he drove out toward the Navaho Reservation, and the flat tire was actually a blowout. He fought the skid of the car to a halt.

He stood beside the car on the deserted highway. As far as he could see in the hot sun there was nothing but barren sandhills and cactus. A dry and desolate country fit only for lizards. He looked down at the blown tire. Then he went to the trunk to get his tools and the spare. The blowout would hold him up at least fifteen minutes.

He saw the cause of the blowout. A large two-by-four studded with nails was lying on the highway.

Illya took his tools and spare tire from the trunk, setting to work on his blown tire, but his eyes beneath his lowered brow searched the countryside near the road. The two-by-four could be an accident, or it could be a trap. The board was at least six feet long, studded with nails all around. Nothing could have passed over it without a blowout, yet his car was the only stalled vehicle.

It could have been dropped, accidentally, of course, only a short time ago, and traffic was light on this highway. Not another car had passed since the blowout. But it could also have been placed in the road purposely to stop him. He was still puzzling this out, and working on his tire, when it happened.

At first it was only a low rumble, a rumble and a whine, distant and off to the north.

Illya glanced up. There was a line of low brown mountains off to the north. The sound was behind them, growing louder. Growing rapidly louder.

Incredibly louder—a roar and a screaming whine—the road began to shake. His car began to shake; he felt the ground tremble.

A fantastic noise, roaring and

whining, growing louder and louder.

Illya Kuryakin fell flat to the ground.

It appeared over the crest of the low brown mountains two miles away. The noise of its roar was impossible, it was so loud.

It flashed over.

Was gone.

Illya whirled to see it vanish, climbing high into the glazing hot blue sky.

Illya stood up and stared after it. A long black cylinder, with stubby wings and glowing a dull red. Without markings or identification of any kind.

He turned and stared out across the arid land to the line of low brown hills. It had come from behind there. And then, even as he watched, it appeared again. Miles away it went past at its incredible speed, vanished behind the low hills, and there was silence.

It had landed. Somewhere out there behind those hills. Illya completed changing his tire, put away his tools, and drove the car off the road. Then he stopped, gathered up his kit and the small suitcase, and started to walk out across the dry land toward the distant hills.

* * *

NAPOLEON SOLO faced the sweating Army man. Caslow looked from Solo to the eager face of Penny Parsons. The Army man looked past them both to the locked door as if hoping for help, for a miracle.

"You might as well tell us," Solo said. "Something happened on that last flight."

"No!" Caslow cried.

The trapped captain still looked toward the door as though he expected someone or something to come through its solid steel. With the help of Penny Parsons, in whom he had confided, Solo had managed to get Caslow alone, away from Wozlak. Now the Army captain sweated.

"You've been making flights to somewhere," Solo insisted. "After your vacation you started staying out too long on your test flights, both you and Wozlak."

"We've had trouble with the ships!"

"No one else has had that trouble. I've checked the flight reports," Solo said.

"So we got two bad ships!"

"Both of you? And then you coincidentally come down with a strange disease?"

Penny Parsons burst out. "Tell him, Mark! I know you're in some trouble. It's that Wozlak, he put you into trouble—I knew he would."

"Shut up, Penny!"

The Army man was deadly pale.

"You've got to tell Mr. Solo. He can—" the girl began.

Caslow turned even whiter. "Mr.—who?"

"Solo," the agent said. "My real

name is Napoleon Solo, and I work with the same people Diaz did."

"Diaz?" Caslow almost whispered. "No."

"You know what happened to him, don't you, Caslow?"

But Caslow did not seem to hear. He was staring into space.

"U.N.C.L.E.! You're with U.N.C.L.E." Caslow whispered.

"Tell me what happened to Diaz, and what you're mixed up in! We know, Caslow. We'll find out what it is," Solo said.

"No more," Caslow whispered. "Don't ask any more!"

Penny Parsons insisted. "Please, Mark, tell Mr. Solo!"

"No more! You don't understand! No more!"

Solo leaned close to the sweating officer. His handsome face was grim as he stared into Caslow's eyes. His voice was low and insistent.

"We'll have to turn you over to the CIA. You realize that? You might as well tell us. If you don't I'll have to take you back to New York. We'll use pentathol, and—"

Complete terror filled the eyes of the Army man. He seemed to be in the grip of a titanic struggle. Then he went limp.

"All right," Caslow said. "I'll tell you what you want to know."

There was a small, sharp explosion. A tiny puff of smoke appeared over Caslow's heart. The Army man screamed once and fell off his chair to the floor. There was blood. Penny Parsons stared in horror and then uttered a small cry.

Solo bent over the man. Caslow was dead. Solo opened the uniform coat, looked.

"Thrush. It's their trick," Solo said. "A lethal charge inserted under the skin over the heart. It must have been programmed into his blood pressure."

Penny Parsons stammered. "Blood pressure? Programmed?"

Solo nodded. "Probably works like a lie-detector. Set to explode when a change in blood pressure indicates a man under interrogation cracks, decides to talk. The blood pressure would show that. Typical Thrush tactics. I should have guessed."

"Who is Thrush?" Penny asked.

"It's better that you don't know, Penny," Solo said. He looked down at the dead Caslow. He felt sorry for the man, it was a hard way to go. Still, there was no doubt that Calow and Wozlak were somehow involved with Thrush. "What you don't know can't get you to end up like this."

"But I do know," Penny said, "Don't I? I mean, I know about Mark and that awful Wozlak, and I know about you, and—"

"I get the point," Solo said. "All right. It's possible we could use you anyway. Let's go, before Major Smart gets smart and starts looking for Caslow. I don't think the major would care for our explanation of how Caslow died."

"Go? Go where?" the lab girl said.

"Why, New Mexico, of course. I imagine we'll find our friend Wozlak there somewhere," Solo said.

"But I can't get time off to—"

"That will be arranged, Penny," Solo said. "New Mexico is the next piece of the puzzle. I think we will find more than our friend Wozlak —a lot more."

THREE

THE LINE of low brown hills was farther away than Illya Kuryakin had imagined. All afternoon, through the blazing sun and heat of the barren New Mexico land, he had walked toward them. Land fit only to be given to the sad remnants of a proud people.

As he walked in the heat Illya wondered again at the hypocrisy of those who were shocked by Siberia but blind to the equal horror visited upon the Indians. At least, in Siberia, the condemned sometimes got their release.

It was night when Illya at last reached the line of low hills. Moving carefully, he made his way up in the dark of the desert night. He reached the crest without seeing or hearing anything. He crawled the last few feet and looked over and out.

He saw a long, narrow valley, dark and indistinct in the night. Apparently, it was barren and empty. And yet there was something odd. Nothing moved; there was no ray of light. Yet Illya had the feeling that something, someone, was down there. He opened his small suitcase and took out a pair of infra-red binoculars.

Through the glasses the details were clearer in the night. There was nothing he could put his finger on, but he still sensed that something was odd down there. He watched for some hours, but there was neither light nor movement anywhere in the long, narrow valley below. There seemed to be no defenses of any kind.

Could he be wrong? He remembered the nail-studded two-by-four on the highway. Had they set a trap to divert him, send him on a wild goose chase? It was possible, yet he did not think so. Somewhere down there was the strange black craft that flew so fast it glowed red.

At midnight, Illya Kuryakin decided there was nothing more he could do until dawn. He needed sleep. He found a small, but deep culvert on the other side of the hills, and crawled in. He checked all approaches, set out four tiny alarm cells so that no one could approach without warning, and then lay down to sleep because it would be a long day tomorrow and he needed all his strength.

* * *

IN THE telephone booth at the Elk River airport, Maxine Trent looked out through the glass sides at a

twin-engine plane taxiing down the runway. The deep voice at the other end of the telephone line was concerned.

"Solo is leaving Elk River? Why? He could not have found anything, at least not so quickly. The computer said U.N.C.L.E. could learn nothing at all from Wozlak or Caslow."

"Did the computer know about the girl?" Maxine said into the black instrument, her eyes still following the small plane on the runway.

"Girl? What girl?"

"Caslow's girl friend, a Penny Parsons," Maxine said. "Now Caslow's dead, and Solo and the girl are flying out to New Mexico."

The deep voice swore. "Caslow dead?"

"The programmed destruct device worked. He was about to talk," Maxine reported. "It seems he neglected to tell us that he had a girl friend, and our agents failed to detect her."

"Someone will pay!" the deep voice snarled. "And Wozlak? What about him?"

"Escaped to New Mexico. With Solo on to Caslow, Wozlak was no more use here," Maxine said.

The voice cursed again. "Follow Napoleon Solo, alert our people at Noche Triste. The computer did not know about the girl."

"That's the trouble with machines," Maxine said. "They can't think."

"Let us see that you can, Agent Trent," the deep voice said. "Solo and the girl must be eliminated!"

"A pleasure," Maxine said, as she watched the small twin-engined plane take off.

Moments later she hung up and walked quickly to a second plane that waited on the runway.

* * *

ILLYA KURYAKIN awakened at the first light of dawn over the barren desert land of the Navaho Reservation. His hand on his U.N.C.L.E. special, he peered cautiously out of the culvert. There was nothing in sight. High up a golden eagle soared looking for food. The giant bird sailed high and undisturbed. Illya left his culvert, retrieved his four tiny warning cells, and began to crawl up to where he could look down into the long valley.

Nothing had changed. The long, narrow valley between the brown hills was as empty as ever. Nothing but rocks and dry ground, cactus and stunted trees gasping for life in the arid land. And yet . . .

Illya trained his binoculars on the bottom of the valley. Something was very peculiar. He studied the hills, and the distant ends of the valley.

Then he started his binoculars at the tops of the hills across the valley and worked slowly down to the bottom.

And he saw it.

The contour was wrong! The valley was too shallow!

The natural fall of the land should have made the valley deeper, narrower at the bottom. Now, studying the terrain carefully and knowing what he looked for, Illya saw the places where boulders seemed to suddenly bend in the middle and become flat, where trees on the slopes of the hills were too short. Camouflage!

Almost perfect, it was. From the air it would have been totally impossible to see. Even as close as he was he could not be absolutely certain. The entire bottom of the long valley was camouflage, and beneath the false bottom—?

Carefully, carrying his equipment, Illya began to work his way down toward the bottom of the valley. It was hard going, steep, and he noticed, now that he was farther down the side of the hill, the wide perimeter of completely open space, a wide lane, just before the apparent bottom of the valley.

Illya studied the situation from beneath his lowered brow. The sun was coming up over the rim of the hills and there was not much time. He searched for a better approach route to the bottom of the valley. There seemed to be no way. He would have to chance crossing the open area.

He crouched very low in the dawn light and stepped out from behind a boulder to start across the cleared area. He took two steps and stopped again, crouched like a small animal in the dawn. His eyes stared at a tiny projection in the ground.

He looked left and right. Caught by the first slanting rays of sun, the tiny projections stood a quarter of an inch out of the ground in a long and endless row all the way in either direction.

Illya studied the tiny projections. Mines? He reached into his small suitcase, laid carefully on the hard earth, and brought out his small explosives detector. He placed it beside the miniature projection in front of him. The detector did not register. The projection was not a mine.

He returned the explosives de-

tector to his suitcase, and took out the flat, miniature electronic activator. He set the miniaturized instrument on *detect* and placed it next to the projection. The dial registered immediately. The small metal projections were the sensors of an alarm system.

Smiling grimly to himself, Illya returned his equipment to the briefcase, and crawled slowly backward until he was again in the shelter of the boulder. He crouched again and studied the terrain right and left. He could risk crossing the open space, but he could not risk triggering an electronic alarm system. There had to be another way down.

Carrying his equipment, Illya began to circle the area slowly, keeping out of sight above the cleared sector. He moved quickly and silently. At last he found what he wanted.

A natural gully-like arroyo cut into the side of the mountain and led all the way to the bottom. There was cover from view all the way. There would be the electronic sensors, but out of sight he could move slowly enough to avoid them. He smiled his quizzical smile—no system was perfect.

He moved down the arroyo, his eyes on the ground. He stepped carefully and lightly, avoiding the electronic sensors that stuck up from the ground almost invisible. He had moved halfway down to where a yawning shadow ahead showed where the space opened beneath the camouflage when he heard the noise.

He jumped.

His eyes on the yawning black opening ahead, aware of the alarm sensors, and yet hearing the noise of footsteps approaching, Illya leaped to a small boulder where there would be no sensors. On the boulder he saw an open space behind it, flat and smooth and hidden. He jumped down.

His feet struck—and sank.

In an instant he was up to his knees, halfway up to his waist from the force of his leap. His legs were under the smooth surface, held, immobile.

Quicksand.

Calmly, he laid his flat suitcase on the smooth surface and pressed against it to raise himself.

Nothing happened.

The suitcase pressed into the soft surface, but his legs did not budge. And slowly, very slowly, he was sinking. He tried to raise each leg separately. He could do nothing. He stopped struggling. The less he moved the slower he would sink. But he sank. Very slowly, almost imperceptibly, but he sank.

He heard a noise and looked up. A man stood on the rock above him. The man carried an ugly Thrush rifle.

The man stood there and looked down at him.

"Good morning, Mr. Kuryakin,"

the man said. "Are you comfortable?"

"Quite comfortable," Illya said.

"Good. Alas, I'm sorry you cannot swim in that sand, or stand either. Interesting material, quicksand. Too solid for swimming, too liquid for walking. You will have much time to consider the error of your associations before you die."

Illya watched the man. If he could shoot the man now, the man's body could fall across the sand and give him a hold to pull out on. The man laughed.

"No, don't try to shoot me. You'd never move fast enough," the man said. "You're a rather small man. It should take about ten hours to sink all the way. I'll be back for the final inch."

And the man was gone.

In the quicksand, helpless and sinking so slowly, Illya remained icily calm. Movement would only sink him faster. He knew now that it was all a trap. The entire security set-up had been designed to force him into the arroyo and, finally, into the quicksand. And he had followed the path like a stupid mule.

But there was no time to waste on his own stupidity. They had him, and there was only one way out. He opened the small suitcase and took out his pencil radio sender-receiver. He clocked it on.

"Sonny, this is Bubba. Red alert! I need help! Sonny? Come in, Sonny."

There was silence. The blazing sun was up above the edge of the arroyo now. As Illya Kuryakin slowly sank, the sun burned like a red-hot flame against his bare head. He continued to talk into his miniature radio as he slowly sank deeper and deeper.

Even with the distance relay, there was no answer from the silent radio. Illya breathed deeply, the quicksand up to his waist now.

"Sonny, this is Bubba, come in! Red alert!"

FOUR

NAPOLEON SOLO led Penny Parsons from the small plane at the Santa Fe airport. He looked up toward the other small aircraft that was now circling the field. Solo grinned. They were after him, but they were also telling him that he was getting warm.

"What is that annoying noise?" Penny said.

The pretty young scientist was staring at Solo. The noise was coming from his suit-coat pocket.

"What are you, wired for sound?" Penny said.

Solo took out his radio and clicked it on.

"Sonny? Relay from Bubba. Acknowledge."

Solo bent to the instrument. "Sonny here, relay Bubba."

Illya's voice came on. A calm voice, yet Solo could hear the tension in the voice of his fellow agent and best friend. Illya was in deep

trouble. Solo looked around. No one seemed to be watching.

"Go ahead, Illya," Solo said.

The voice of the small, blond agent had a faint edge.

"I seem to be in a rather sticky situation, Napoleon," Illya's voice said. "Literally, I fear. Where are you?"

"Santa Fe," Solo said. "What's the trouble?"

"Quicksand. About chest high by now. They led me into it very nicely."

"How long do you have?"

"Perhaps four hours, even five. You say you're in Sante Fe?"

"Yes. Where are you?"

"A few miles from Noche Triste," Illya said calmly. "That's about two hundred miles from you."

"I'll get a helicopter," Solo said.

Penny Parsons was staring at the sight of Solo bent over a shiny pencil and talking. The other small plane had landed and was taxiing up. Solo watched it from the corner of his eye. Two men had appeared in the Santa Fe Airport building. They were looking at him and the girl.

"No," Illya said. "One look at a helicopter and they would undoubtedly come back and do the job more quickly. You'll have to drive."

"It'll be close," Solo said. "I think I have company."

There was a silence from the other end, the distant spot where Illya stood up to his chest and sinking in the blazing sun.

"We'll have to chance it, and come carefully."

"Roger, right now," Solo said.

"And Napoleon," Illya's voice said. "Bring a rope."

There was no more time. The two men were walking toward Solo and Penny Parsons. Solo clicked off his set. The other small plane was halted, and Solo saw the woman emerge. He smiled. Good old Maxine. He gripped the girl's arm. Penny stared at him.

"Now do just as I tell you," Solo whispered. "We're going on a drive, but first we have to get rid of some unwelcome friends."

"But I—" the girl began.

"Just do what I do," Solo said.

Suddenly, his hand on the girl's arm, he began to walk toward the exit. The two men speeded up to cut him off. Behind him, Maxine and another man were in the door out to the field itself. Quickly, Solo doubled back and dragged Penny toward the baggage exit. The two men whirled to follow.

In the doorway to the field, Maxine sent the man with her to block the baggage exit from outside. Solo doubled back again and headed for the rest room area, pulling the protesting girl after him. He was watching his pursuers carefully.

He doubled back toward the street door once more. As he pulled the girl on this last maneu-

ver, Maxine and his two other pursuers came after him on courses that converged. He hurried closer to them until he saw that in a few more steps they would all be at the same spot.

He dropped the smoke bomb at the exact spot they hurried toward.

Thick white smoke billowed up. People began to scream. A wild chaos filled the air terminal building. Solo gripped the girl and dashed straight through the smoke, exactly where his pursuers were struggling to break out of the smoke cloud. Maxine was shouting.

"The other door! Quickly, you fools!"

Solo and Penny Parsons brushed right past them in the smoke and emerged on the other side just at the exit. Solo grinned. He pushed the girl ahead of him through the exit and out into the driveway area. A taxi stood at the taxi stand. Solo and Penny hurried toward it.

The fourth pursuer, the one sent to guard the baggage exit, came running toward the cab, his gun out, all caution gone now. Solo dropped him with a single shot from his special, a shot with a sleep dart. *Puh!* The man fell and skidded four feet. Solo pushed Penny into the cab and jumped in.

"The nearest car rental agency, driver," Solo said, his pistol still in his hand. "I would suggest speed."

The driver needed no further urging. Maxine Trent and her two henchmen were already coming out of the terminal building. Solo waved to them as the taxi drove away.

* * *

ILLYA KURYAKIN watched the sun going down behind the opposite rim of the valley. The quicksand was up to his armpits now, and in the last hour he had begun to sink faster. He had been in the sand over twelve hours, and all that had saved him was his suitcase.

Flat, the suitcase presented a wider surface to the sand. Not enough to pull out against, it sank much more slowly and by hanging onto it Illya had slowed his descent. But soon the sand would reach his shoulders, and then his chin, and then—

Moving as slowly as possible, using one hand, he raised the pencil radio to his lips again.

"Sonny this is Bubba. How much farther do you have?"

The voice of Solo came in. "About thirty miles, Illya. We're driving as fast as possible."

Illya did not answer. He was saving his strength. Each time his foot moved it sank another fraction of an inch. He kept hoping to find some bottom. But there was no bottom. Soon the sand was at his shoulder, then his chin would be reached, and then . . .

NAPOLEON SOLO saw the car off the highway in the last rays of the sun. It was Illya's car, there was no doubt. A typical Thrush mistake, to leave the car. Solo stopped the car and looked out toward the low line of brown hills. On foot he would never make it.

"Hang on, Penny," he said grimly.

The girl blanched. "You're not! Oh no, the car can't make it!"

"Let's see if perhaps it can," Solo said, and turned the car off the highway.

He drove in the purple desert twilight, bumping and lurching across the barren land. Illya had said there was a tall peak, flat on top, directly behind where he was. Solo could see it clearly ahead against the purple twilight sky.

* * *

THE SAND reached his shoulder, flowed up toward his chin. Illya clung to the flat suitcase that was under the surface of the sand now.

It was dark.

The last purple rays had gone behind the hills, and now Illya sank alone in the pitch dark. His light was in his case under the sand. He had long ago dropped his pistol, it was no use in this battle. Even his pencil radio was gone, slipped into the sand and vanished.

With no radio he had lost contact. There was no one now to talk

to, to help him remain sane, to keep up his faint last hopes. Was this, then, the end?

To vanish under a surface that was neither sand nor water?

Gone, and no trace to show where he had gone?

* * *

THE CAR gave out at the base of the first hill, its axle finally breaking under the strain of the impossible drive. Solo leaped out, took his briefcase and the rope, and motioned to Penny Parsons to follow him.

Silently they climbed the low hills. He was directly behind the tall, flat-topped hill, but he could see nothing in the dark.

He put on his infra-red goggles, took the girl's hand, and climbed.

At the crest he looked down at the long valley. The small arroyo was off to the left. Sliding in the dry dirt, he went down toward the dark arroyo.

He could see nothing.

Then he saw the boulder Illya Kuryokin had described. He motioned to the girl to stay where she was, and moved cautiously toward the boulder. He kept his eyes on the ground, stepping over the electronic sensors. He reached the boulder and looked down.

A flat, smooth surface stretched in front of him like a pool of water in the darkness. Then he saw the black object.

"I would suggest speed, Napoleon," Illya said.

Solo smiled. The black object was Illya's head. The sand had just reached the small Russian's chin. As Solo watched, he saw the pale shape that was Illya's right hand.

"Here comes the rope," Solo said.

He tossed the rope. Illya caught it the first time, passed the loop over his hand and into the crook of his elbow. On the boulder Solo began to pull.

Nothing happened.

"The boulder," Illya said.

Solo stepped down carefully, and passed the rope around the boulder. Then he leaned all his weight against the rope end and dug his feet into the hard dirt.

The rope began to give. Solo dug in and struggled ahead, the rope over his shoulder. Suddenly it gave completely and Solo sprawled in the dirt. He jumped up and began pulling more easily.

"All right, enough," Illya called from the other side of the boulder. "I'm out; you'll drag me half over the landscape."

Solo stopped pulling and jumped up to the top of the boulder.

"Ingrate," Solo said, grinning.

Illya, on firm land, stood up and began to pick the thick quicksand from his clothes.

Then the two men moved cautiously back up the arroyo to

where Penny Parsons waited. The girl looked nervously around in the dark night.

"Now can we go?" she asked.

"Not until dawn," Illya said. "Much too dangerous to try to go down there again at night."

"You're not going—" Penny began.

Illya shrugged. "Of course. I didn't come here for a swim in quicksand. We still have to find out what there is down there that goes whizz-bang in the night."

Solo handed Illya a spare U.N.C.L.E. special, and the two agents lay down to sleep and wait for the dawn. Penny Parsons sat on the ground and stared at them.

FIVE

MOVING CAUTIOUSLY in the first light of dawn, Illya and Solo reached the yawning black opening beneath the camouflage. They had left Penny securely hidden in a narrow culvert. Now they peered into the maw of the real valley floor beneath the camouflage.

The camouflage reached from one side of the valley to the other, some hundred yards, and rested on supports some fifty feet high. Its length was impossible to estimate—at least two miles along the entire valley floor.

Under the net there were low, flat buildings that almost reached the camouflage above. The buildings told them nothing, and there was no one in sight. Illya pointed to the ground.

"Napoleon, look!"

Solo looked at the ground. He whistled low.

The ground was not ground—it was a smooth cement road. A very wide road, with heavy black marks.

"A runway," Solo said.

"I think we have found where our unidentified flying objects come from," Illya said. He had already described the glowing black craft he had seen fly over him.

"But it's only two miles long, maybe even less."

"Enough with booster rockets," Illya said. "Still, it would take very well trained men to lift off just at the edge there from under the camouflage."

"That's probably why they need expert rocket pilots."

"What I saw flew even faster

than a normal rocket," Illya said.

Solo rubbed his chin. "There was radiation around the hole of that explosion. One probably crashed."

"Nuclear propulsion!" Illya said. "And no one has managed to use it for aircraft before."

Solo looked around. "One thing puzzles me. I can see how they manage to take off, but how do they land?"

"Let's find out," Illya said.

The small, blond Russian led the way in a quick dash across the runway to the first low building. The two agents peered in at a window.

Inside the building a horde of black-clad men worked over a long, enormous engine. It was a strange affair, unlike anything Solo or Illya had ever seen.

The agents continued on, running crouched from building to building. Inside another building they saw slabs of black metal-like material glowing in a wind tunnel.

"Heat shield material. That explains the glow on the black plane," Illya said. "At that speed, most materials would melt. They seem to have developed everything."

The third building proved to be a personnel testing installation. Inside it men were seated in big pressure chambers; white-coated men worked over them. There were many glass bottles. As the two agents watched, injections of some pale blue substance were being administered to a group of men.

Then the three armed men came around the corner of the building.

"Quick!" Illya cried.

Solo and Illya ran to a door in the building. It was open. They dashed inside. At the door they listened. The footsteps were approaching the door.

"There," Solo whispered.

A metal door stood open to the left down a dark corridor. Illya and Solo ran for it, entered a large room with benches along the side, and slammed the door shut behind them. Outside in the corridor the footsteps came closer, passed, and faded away.

"Close," Illya said. "Did you see those men being injected, Napoleon?"

Solo nodded. "Yes, I did. I have a hunch that might explain our 'silent malady'. Some effect of a special drug."

"You noticed they were being injected before entering a pressure chamber. I also noticed a jet sled for speed effect testing," Illya said. He nodded soberly. "You know, Napoleon, that black ship I saw moved much faster than anything else I ever heard about. That much speed would have effects on a pilot. I wonder if they have developed a drug of some kind for that purpose, a drug which has side effects?"

"Could be," Solo said. "Let's get out of here and find out."

"An excellent suggestion," Illya said.

The small, blond agent walked to the metal door. He turned the handle, but it would not turn. Illya Kuryakin tried again. Solo watched him. The handle would not turn the fraction of an inch. Solo started toward the door to help.

Solo rose from the floor, floated in the air.

Illya, his hand on the handle of the door, was suddenly above the handle, floating, his body higher than his hand.

Solo floated up and crashed into the metal ceiling. The chief agent tried to force himself down with a lunge. He careened across the room, smashed against a metal wall.

Illya lost his grip on the door handle and tumbled through the air. The small agent cried out.

"Weightless! It's a weightlessness test chamber!"

"You're telling me!" Solo said, floating in the air, smashing against the floor on his back and bounding up.

"We can't handle it!" Illya cried.

"Try!" Solo said.

"It takes training," Illya said, fighting to remain upright in the air, unable to, falling over horizontally.

There was a noise, the sound of metal sliding. The two agents twisted in the air, saw that a metal panel had slid back to show a thick plate glass window. A man's face watched them from the other side of the window.

A fat, round face that smiled benignly at them like a small, pink cherub.

ACT III
ONE EGG IN A CONDOR'S NEST

THE STEEL WALLS of the room were windowless. The door was barred. Penny Parsons sat and was afraid.

"They found me an hour ago. I hoped that you—" she did not finish.

"We'll get you out, Penny," Solo said.

The barred door opened. A small, fat man entered with two silent guards dressed in black. The guards carried Thrush rifles. The small man had the fat, round face that had watched them through the window of the weightless test room. The fat man beamed at them.

"I doubt that you will, Mr. Solo," the fat man said, "but I must say I admire your ability and resourcefulness. You got so much farther than the computer said you would. I have little faith in thinking machines. A man is the true thinking machine."

"Meaning yourself?" Solo said.

The fat little man laughed.

"Well, in all modesty, I think that you will find Dr. Ernesto Guerre listed among the geniuses, especially after this project is completed. I imagine Waverly has a fair dossier on me. Too bad it will not help you."

Illya studied the little man from where he sat. The quizzical eyes of the small Russian were interested.

"Dr. Ernesto Guerre," Illya said softly. "I remember. You worked for the Soviet once. Before that—"

"Before that for that fool Hitler, yes. They all did not believe I could do it, but I have done it. And with my brain, not with a computer! I warned them that Diaz was a bad mistake, but they trusted their Ultimate Computer."

"Diaz found out?" Illya said.

"He managed to get past our personnel check and play the part of a rocket pilot," Dr. Guerre said, and laughed. "Luckily, he did not know about the side effects of *metabala-G*. You were quite correct, Mr. Kuryakin, *metabala-G* is a little development of mine to enable pilots to stand the speeds of the Q-ninety-nine."

"It affects the speech and language section of the brain?" Illya said.

"It does. We are working on it. But, after all, pilots do not need speech," Guerre said.

"The Q-ninety-nine is a plane?" Solo said.

Guerre nodded. "Nuclear propulsion, speeds never dreamed of, unlimited range. They all said I was crazy."

"Maybe they're right," Solo said.

Guerre narrowed his small eyes, but the perpetual benign smile never left his fat face. "Thrush does not think so, Mr. Solo, and I will give them rule of the world! They are men of vision! Not like your soft world powers. With my work, Project Condor will give Thrush complete world domination!"

"Not with a few aircraft, no matter how fast," Illya said.

"No, but—" Dr. Guerre started to say, and stopped. The happy-looking little fat man laughed. "I think I have told you enough. I dislike men to die curious, but you know enough. Now I think we will find out what you know. Personally, I would just kill you. Very simple, a bullet in the head. But my Thrush friends want to pick your brains."

The fat little man turned and walked out through the door. His place was taken by a smiling Maxine Trent. The two guards had not moved. Maxine smiled at Solo.

"My poor Napoleon, caught again. I'm surprised at you, walking right in like this. I believe you could have escaped after you pulled Kuryakin out of the quicksand. Our man was very careless there. He's gone."

"Hello, Maxine," Solo said. "You never give up, do you?"

"For you, my dear Napoleon? Never. I really have a strong attachment to you. I wouldn't have anyone kill you except me."

"I'm touched," Solo said.

"Besides, I owe you something for that Australian affair. My superiors were most annoyed by that. I think I'll give them your brain on a platter."

"A modern Salome," Illya said drily.

Maxine looked at the small Russian. Illya grinned at the Thrush agent.

"We won't neglect you, Kuryakin. Our Russian section is most interested in you," Maxine said. "However, I think we'll start with the girl. I want our men well warmed up by the time they get to Napoleon."

"She doesn't know anything," Solo said.

Maxine laughed. "Gallantry, Napoleon? How interesting. But I imagine Miss Parsons knows more than even she is aware of. Take her out!"

The command was given to the two black-garbed guards. They led the shivering Penny Parsons out of the room. With a mocking wave, Maxine followed the guards and the girl.

The room became silent.

"She doesn't know anything," Solo said.

"They'll kill her then," Illya said. "They won't believe her, she was with us."

"I thought she'd be safer."

"You were right as far as it went," Illya said. "After she talked to you, they would have gone after her anyway. The question now is, what can we do for her?"

"First we better get out of here," Solo said.

"I agree," Illya said. "I'll watch the door."

Illya went to stand at the small barred window in the door. Solo bent over and examined the cuff of his trousers. After a few moments he reached down and gently pulled a long thread out of the trousers. He laid it on the floor in front of him and turned to the other trouser leg. He pulled out another long thread. He laid this beside the first long thread.

Then Solo began to twist the two threads together. He twisted them carefully, leaving the last inch of each thread spread apart. He ended with a stiff, braided, stringlike filament about a foot long.

"There are no guards in the corridor," Illya said from the door. "I wonder why?"

"We'll probably find out," Solo said.

Solo was removing the buttons from his suit coat sleeve. He took the four buttons, and tied them together in pairs with a third thread from his trousers. He left an inch of each thread protruding

from the button hole. Then he stood up and looked at Illya.

"Did they leave you anything?"

Illya shook his head. The search had been thorough and expert. Neither agent had been left even his shoes or his belt. Nothing but the clothes they stood in.

"Nothing," Illya said. "We're lucky they left you your clothes. Mine were ruined by the quicksand."

Solo handed Illya one set of buttons tied into the tiny pairs.

"This will have to do then," Solo said.

"Ready?" Illya said. "I don't like there being no guards outside. They feel secure."

"Well, maybe we can change that," Solo said, grinning.

Solo picked up the stiff, braided filament made from the two threads from his trousers and carried them to the door. He doubled the string over twice, and pressed it against the door exactly where the lock was on the outside. The string struck there with self-adhesive.

Then Solo touched the two separated ends, rubbed them lightly together, and jumped back.

There was a tiny flash of flame at the ends of the braided threads, and then a blindingly bright glow. The glow, white hot, lasted a full minute. When the glow faded, there was a gaping hole in the steel door six inches across where the lock had been.

The door swung open at a touch from Napoleon Solo.

TWO

THEY SAW a light at the far end of the long corridor. Solo led the way in the opposite direction. The corridor ended in a solid wall of rock. They retraced their steps toward the light at the other end. The walls of the corridor were smooth, unbroken rock.

"It must be a cave in the hillside," Illya said.

"Which explains no guards," Solo said. "Down there is the only way out. That's where the guards are."

The two agents reached the end of the corridor. They peered out and saw that the cave opened into a room. This room was also steel, and two armed guards sat in chairs at a desk. There were windows in this room with light coming through them from outside. The windows were barred.

The two guards were having an argument about the comparative merits of American and South American women. It was a heated discussion, and they did not hear the faint noise made by Solo and Illya as the two agents prepared the tiny buttons in their hands.

"Now," Illya hissed softly.

Both agents pinched the inch of thread that protruded from the buttons, and tossed the tiny pellets out into the room. The guards

heard them, turned, their Thrush rifles raised and pointed. That was the last thing they ever did.

Illya and Solo dashed back into the corridor and fell flat.

Two shattering explosions ripped the steel room.

The guards screamed once and were hurled against the steel walls. The table in the room smashed into pieces. The chairs hurled into the air.

Illya and Solo leaped up and ran back into the room. They looked at the dead guards and at their weapons. Both rifles were twisted shards of metal.

There were no other guns in the room. The outside door, blown open by the explosions, hung crazily from shattered hinges.

"No time!" Illya cried. "We'll have to run for it! No weapons!"

Already voices were shouting somewhere.

"Let's go!" Solo cried.

The two agents ran out of the steel room and into the open area beneath the high camouflage. Alarm bells had begun to ring. Far off, near the building where they had been caught, they saw the tiny, fat figure of the cherubic Doctor Guerre. The little round man was bawling orders.

Black-suited guards ran all across the area beneath the camouflage.

In the distance there was a whine, incredibly high, and then the roaring of a motor. The roaring came closer. Illya pointed far down the runway.

A black craft, long, tubular and with stubby black wings, hurtled down the runway, a long tail of vapor jetting out behind.

At this instant, the agents were seen.

"Get them!"

From all sides the black-garbed guards converged toward Illya and Solo—from all sides but one.

No guards came at them across the runway where the nuclear-powered aircraft was hurtling forward.

"Quick!" Illya cried.

The small Russian led Napoleon Solo across the runway directly into the path of the onrushing nuclear craft. They crossed in front and fell to the ground.

The plane hurled past them.

The force of its passage picked them up and threw them across the runway like tumbleweed blown on a high desert wind. They held their heads in their arms, taking the bruising buffeting until they at last lay still.

Solo was up first, a deep gash on his face where a rock had cut.

"Let's move!" Solo cried.

Illya Kuryakin staggered up. The small Russian's ear was torn, his face bruised, but there was no time to assess damage. Black-suited guards were running across the runway through the cloud of dense vapor left by the nuclear craft that was now airborne.

"I'm right with you," Illya shouted.

The passage of the nuclear craft, and the dense cloud of vapor, had given them a head start and a clear field ahead. They ran.

When they reached the edge of the high camouflage, they ran on out into the sunlight and up the arroyo they had crept down earlier that morning. They did not move carefully now to avoid the electronic sensors.

Behind them more alarm bells began to ring as they kicked the sensors.

"The car is on the other side!" Solo shouted. "If we can reach it."

"If they've left it!" Illya shouted back. "I suggest we try to lose our friends first!"

The blazing earth burned their bare feet cruelly. Behind them the guards were still coming, threading their way up the arroyo.

Solo and Illya reached the crest and looked down. Solo's rented car was gone. The two agents crouched low and looked back. The guards were scrambling up behind them.

Solo went to work removing four more buttons from his suit coat. He tied them together with the last explosive threads from his trousers. The four buttons were the last tiny bombs.

He handed one small bomb to Illya.

They waited.

The black-suited guards came closer. They were bunched up, the guards, like amateurs. Far down at the foot of the arroyo, the fat figure of Dr. Guerre still shouted orders. The guards reached no more than forty feet from Illya and Solo.

"Now," Solo said once more.

The two agents stood, lobbed the tiny bombs stiff-armed, like hurling grenades. The two tiny pellets arched through the hot sunlight and fell into the bunched crowd of pursuing guards.

The explosions shook the arroyo.

Rocks hurled, and arms and legs fell mangled across the hot land. There was a silence. Then the groans began.

They lay all across the arid and sun-baked dirt. They groaned and screamed in their agony. None had been left untouched in the first bunched group, and farther down the arroyo the rest of the guards huddled out of range and stared up at the crest.

Behind them Dr. Guerre was swearing, urging them on. But the guards were wary now. Two men they had thought unarmed had proved to have sharp teeth after all.

It was then that the helicopter appeared.

Over the desert from the west, flying low and rising up over the crest of the hill. A hand waved down at Solo and Illya, then the helicopter roared on over and

down the hill toward the packed guards.

A sub-machine gun began to chatter from the helicopter.

The guards stared. Two of them fell. The rest broke and ran. They ran down the hill, all the fight gone out of them by the unexpected danger they had found in two defenseless enemies.

At the foot of the arroyo Dr. Guerre rallied his men. Some of them began to take cover and fire at the helicopter. The helicopter came down on the flat top on the crest of the hill. A man leaned out.

"Hurry!" the man called. "They'll get their guts back soon."

Illya and Solo needed no urging. They sprinted for the helicopter. Already Guerre had rallied his men down at the bottom of the arroyo. In a moment, they would be starting up again.

The two agents scrambled into the helicopter. At the bottom of the arroyo Dr. Guerre stood and watched it lift off. Inside, Solo armed himself and handed an U.N.C.L.E. special to Illya.

"How did you find us?" Solo said to the pilot.

"Waverly," the pilot said. "He had your radio transmissions monitored. When you didn't report in all day, he alerted us and sent us here."

"It's good to have a smart chief," Solo said.

"Where to? Santa Fe?" the pilot said.

"No, not Santa Fe," Illya said. "Back to the Thrush project after dark. As soon as it's dark, we have to go back. There's a girl there we have to help."

"Back?" the pilot said.

"Back," Solo said.

"Back," the pilot said. "After dark. Where now?"

"Just set it down near my car," Illya said.

They waited the few hours before the sun would set again over the baked land of the Navaho Reservation. Just before the sun was at the crest of the hills on its way down, as Illya and Solo checked their weapons, the roaring began.

An endless roaring sound like a thousand engines warming up.

Illya and Solo looked at each other.

The roaring seemed to shake the land. It came from behind the line of low hills, down where the camouflaged valley was.

"I think," Illya said, "we will be saved the trouble of going back."

The first black nuclear craft suddenly appeared in the sky, roared over, glowing red from the heat of its incredible speed, and was gone.

Six in all screamed over and vanished into the darkening sky.

The pilot looked toward the hills through his binoculars.

"Look!" he cried.

All across the hills tiny figures were fanning out. Through the

binoculars they were seen to be unarmed and wearing, now, ordinary clothes. They moved quickly down the hills and out across the desert, going in all directions.

"I have a hunch," Illya said. "Let's get away from here."

The pilot started his motors and the helicopter took off into the purple and orange sunset sky. It turned toward Santa Fe.

Behind the helicopter the sky suddenly turned a glaring white, and the line of low hills exploded with one gigantic roar. The helicopter was buffeted by the force of the wind from the explosion.

"They blew it up," Solo said.

"Yes," Illya said. "And Penny with it."

"Unless they took her in one of the aircraft," Solo said.

"Let's hope they took her," Illya said.

Behind them as they flew on toward Santa Fe, the sky glowed a dull red as the hidden valley burned in the now dark night.

THREE

ALEXANDER WAVERLY filled his pipe and looked for a match. His bony fingers searched in the pockets of his tweed suit. Patched up and with a day of sleep behind them, Illya and Solo sat at the revolving table. Waverly found his matches.

"Ah, there," Waverly said. "Well, the Army reports your camouflaged valley is totally destroyed. No bodies were found, and the radiation count was high. I think it is clear that our friends have shifted operations."

"They knew we would bring help," Illya said.

"Quite," Waverly said. "They realized their game was up in New Mexico, and shifted."

"Which leaves us on a limb," Solo said. "They could have gone anywhere."

"*Er*, not quite, Mr. Solo," Waverly said.

"You have a lead," Illya said quickly.

Solo leaned. "If Penny is still alive we owe her—"

"Indeed we do," Waverly interrupted. "But let us start with Dr. Ernesto Guerre. We know a great deal of him, although little about his early life. He was born in Costa Rica, we know, but little else until he appeared in Nazi Germany during the war."

Waverly pressed a buzzer on his desk. The wall behind the desk opened, revealing a screen. A picture appeared on the screen. Dr. Ernesto Guerre smiled out at them from a group of men. All the men wore the field grey of the German Army. The cherubic little fat man seemed ridiculous in the military uniform.

"Colonel Ernest Guerre," the voice of May Heatherly intoned. Solo pictured the beautiful redheaded chief of Communications-

Research, Section-IV, and sighed. May was so efficient.

"Guerre headed a secret project on nuclear development, but the Germans were too far behind at the time," the pretty girl's voice went on.

Waverly broke in. "Guerre was considered unstable even by the Nazis—a monomaniac, given to daring mental leaps but with a tendency to sloppy groundwork. The Soviet government found the same problems."

The next picture flashed on. It showed the tiny little fat man wearing a typical ill-fitting Russian suit and standing before a rocket on a launching pad.

"Dr. Guerre appeared in the Soviet Union after the war. He again headed up a secret project on nuclear propulsion. This time he supposedly got some results, but two engines exploded and killed many technicians and some high-ranking officials. The project was shelved and Guerre vanished," May Heatherly went on.

"But not quite," Waverly said.

Now a series of pictures flashed on and off the screen. They showed a man, in various disguises and places, who could have been the cherubic little Doctor. None of them was very clear.

"These were all taken in various South American cities over the past few years. None of them prove that Guerre is there, but taken with the rumors, I would say our man had been working somewhere in South America recently," Waverly said.

"Those guards!" Solo said. "They were talking about South American women."

Waverly tapped his pipe and nodded. "Precisely. That is another clue. But we can do better than that."

Another picture flashed onto the screen. It was hazy and dark, but it showed what both Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo knew was one of the black nuclear-powered aircraft.

"This was just radioed to us from Venezuela," Waverly said. "It was taken last night near the coast. As you can see, the craft is moving more slowly than you reported, and its wheels are down, hence a landing. It was radioed directly to us by our Section-II Chief in Caracas. It is top secret."

Solo was studying the picture. "Most of the background detail is indistinct."

"Yes, the exact location cannot be guessed," Waverly agreed.

"But surely the man who took the picture can tell us where he took it," Illya said.

"I'm sure he can," Waverly said. "But that we will have to learn in Venezuela. Or, rather, you two will have to learn it. You see, General Hoyos, the defense minister, insists that he will give the exact location to no one but our agents. He fears internal troubles if the news leaked out. He has instructed us not to tell even Washington."

Illya narrowed his eyes beneath his lowered brow. "Isn't that a bit unusual?"

"It is, but General Hoyos was adamant. As a matter of fact, he does not wish the Venezuelan government to officially appear in this at all. You will deal with his assistant, Major General Valera."

"I can understand that," Solo said. "It could hurt him at home if it got out that his office had allowed a foreign power to build nuclear-powered aircraft on Venezuelan soil."

"Precisely, Mr. Solo," Waverly said. "At least, that appears to be the general's thinking on the matter. I'm not sure I agree, but he is insistent that we try to handle this as quietly as possible."

"What more does the general know?" Illya asked.

Waverly puffed on his pipe. "Should he know more?"

"I do not think that Project Condor, as Guerre called it, consists only of the nuclear-powered aircraft. That would not be like Thrush. When they develop a weapon, it is for a definite purpose. Nuclear-propulsion alone would not give Thrush world power, as Guerre implied Project Condor would," Illya said.

"Yes, I tend to agree with you," Waverly said. "But General Hoyos has told us nothing more if there is more to tell. If there is more, it seems that you and Mr. Solo will have to find it."

Solo nodded. "Anything else?"

"Yes, you are aware that the Thrush chief for the area is Council Member L. We know that much, although we have never managed to penetrate his cover. He is a clever man, as we have had reason to learn. Our organization in the country has never been strong, largely due to his efforts and constant harassment."

"Do we know anything about him?" Illya asked.

"Only that he is a very ambitious man with strong insistence on running his own show," Waverly said. "We have long suspected that he has hopes of moving to the top in Thrush, and this affair could be his stepping stone."

"And that's it?" Solo said.

"Except that his hobby is growing roses," Waverly said.

"I doubt that he will invite us to his gardens," Illya said.

"You never can tell," Waverly said. "I suggest that you be very careful, gentlemen."

* * *

AT A WINDOW high above the city of Caracas, a tall, gaunt man stood looking out over the city. Behind him men in army uniforms hurried about the room. This man, too, was thinking about the care of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin. A small smile played across his emaciated face.

Even as he smiled, his office door opened and a powerful, swarthy man entered. This newcomer wore the uniform of a full general of the Venezuelan army. The gaunt man turned smartly from the window and bowed deferentially to the general.

"You have news, General Hoyos?" the gaunt man asked.

"I do. They are on their way, two of them. They assure me that no one else knows about our problem," General Hoyos said. The defense minister showed more worry on his face than his voice would have indicated.

"I wonder if we are being wise," General Hoyos went on. "To keep it so secret. This U.N.C.L.E. organization, can they handle it all alone?"

"With our help, sir, they can." The tall man smiled. "After all, Rudolfo, they will not be alone. I will personally lead the Sixteenth Regiment to help them."

"A good regiment, the Sixteenth," the defense minister agreed.

"You trained them yourself, Rudolfo," the gaunt man said.

"With your aid, Miguel," General Hoyos said.

"We make a good team, General," the gaunt man said.

Hoyos looked at him shrewdly. "I wonder why you have been content to remain behind me all these years, Miguel?"

"Because I am a soldier to serve," the gaunt man said with a smile.

General Hoyos nodded. Then he turned and strode to the first telephone. He barked an order. "Colonel Montoya? This is General Hoyos, yes. You will prepare the Sixteenth Regiment for immediate duty, yes. Immediate. You will report at once to General Valera in his office."

The defense minister hung up. "The rest is up to you, Miguel. I know you will not fail."

And the defense minister was

gone. The tall man walked slowly out into the full light. He wore the uniform of a major general. He smiled his thin smile.

"Yes, the rest is up to me, Rudolfo Hoyos," he said in a soft voice. "And the time has come. I will not be behind you much longer, dear Rudolfo. I will certainly not fail."

And Major General Miguel Valera began to laugh a soundless laugh as he turned and walked into a private office. He locked the door behind him and picked up a telephone.

"Bring Dr. Guerre to the telephone," he barked.

FOUR

THE RAVEN-HAIRED young girl looked up from her desk at the Defense Ministry. She saw a small, slender, blond young man smiling down at her. She touched her hand to her black hair, and her full red lips were moist. She wondered if this young man was married. His clothes looked American—a fine suit and white shirt, and the thick horn-rimmed glasses suited his lean face.

"Yes, *senor?*" she said.

His clothes were indeed American, and the girl liked Americans. They were rich and very important, at least under the present regime. She believed in the present regime, whatever regime it happened to be at any moment.

"Max Derwent to see General Valera," the young man said in perfect Spanish.

The young girl frowned for an instant. Then she brightened again. He spoke fine Spanish, true, but there was an accent. He was not of her country, and that pleased her. She had plans to see the world, become rich. Yet she was puzzled. The young man wore American clothes, was clearly of the North with his fine blond hair, and yet his accent in his perfect Spanish was not quite American. Perhaps an Englishman? That was not so good, but not too bad.

"Of course, Senor Derwent," she said. "And your business?"

"Uniforms, I sell uniforms," the young man said.

The girl nodded, smiled, and moistened her lips again. Illya looked at her fine full lips, red and soft. He looked at her raven-dark hair, and at the figure. What he could see made him glad that Napoleon was not here. He did not have Napoleon's way with women. Still, after this was over, perhaps he could try with this girl.

"General Valera will see you," the girl said.

Illya frowned at himself. The mind on the job, that was his code. He had not left his own country, joined U.N.C.L.E., to meet pretty young girls. A man had his work, his studies, the millions of facts about his world he did not know

but wanted to know. Self-discipline and control, that was what Zen had taught him, and that was how he lived. Still, a pretty girl—

"Thank you," Illya said.

The supposed Max Derwent entered the office of Major General Miguel Valera, assistant to the defense minister. He carried his small suitcase that, supposedly, contained samples of military uniform cloth, and approached the smiling Valera. The general stood up to greet him. Illya saw a tall, gaunt man.

"Ah, Mr. Derwent," Valera said. "Or perhaps I should say Mr. Kuryakin."

"You can say that if the walls don't have ears," Illya said.

Valera laughed. "I assure you, Mr. Kuryakin, my office is not, how do you say, bugged. Not that such is not done here, but the penalty is rather severe, and, anyway, I check carefully each day."

"It must be a difficult way to live," Illya said drily.

"Alas, ambition and the desire to serve have their penalties in my poor country," Valera said. "We do not have your, shall we say, orderly minds. But then, I forget you are a Russian. Still, the Russians, too, have orderly minds."

Illya watched the gaunt general. Valera seemed to be talking a great deal, but that could be just the Latin temperament, as Valera was implying. Valera smiled and waved Illya to a seat.

"General Hoyos has, as you say, filled me in on all this. A terrible affair," Valera said. "I imagine you are anxious to start, as I am myself. We have the Sixteenth Regiment standing by in the area, but out of sight, eh? But first, please, your credentials."

Illya Kuryakin handed over his identification. His quizzical eyes were lowered beneath his brow. He watched Valera. The general read the credentials. Illya smiled.

"You're too modest," Illya said innocently. "I understand this was entirely your idea, not General Hoyos's."

"We work as a team," Valera said crisply. He handed back the credentials. "Now, I am ready if you are. Mr. Solo is waiting, I hope; we have little time to lose."

"Not with those nuclear planes running loose, I agree. You have accounted for all of them?" Illya said quickly.

Valera nodded. "Yes, all six. They were seen to land."

"Excellent," Illya said. "It is important that we get them all."

He talked to cover the slip. But inside he was alert. It was always the same thing that tripped up a liar—too much knowledge. Valera had slipped—not because he knew too little, but because he knew too much. All six, the general had said, but there had been only one in the picture, and Hoyos had not mentioned six to Waverly.

Illya smiled, but his eyes darted

around, alert. He was sure that if six had been seen, Hoyos would have mentioned that important fact. No, Valera had said six planes because Valera knew there were six. Only two groups of people knew that there had been six nuclear planes in New Mexico—U.N.C.L.E. and Thrush!!

Valera smiled. "We really better have Mr. Solo join us now, don't you think?"

"Of course," Illya said. "I'll call the hotel. He'll be ready by now, I'm sure."

"Time is of the essence, Mr. Kuryakin," Valera said.

"Of course," Illya said. He picked up the telephone on Valera's desk.

"Hotel Splendide? Mr. Solo, please. Room four-sixteen."

Illya waited, smiling at Valera. The general smiled back, and then busied himself over papers on his desk.

"Napoleon?" Illya said as Solo came on the line. "Yes, Illya here. I am with General Valera. Yes, all is correct, naturally. The general is anxious to get started. Will you meet us—"

Illya stopped and looked at Valera. The general stood behind his desk.

"At my car out in front. A grey Bentley touring car. He can't mistake it. My general's license plate is on it. Please urge speed; this is an urgent affair."

Illya spoked into the telephone. "Out in front of the Defense Ministry. Valera's car is a grey Bentley touring car with his license on it. And, Napoleon, hurry please."

As Illya put down the instrument he pretended to let it slip to the desk. He picked it up again and replaced it in its cradle. But he had heard the faint but tell-tale click on the line—someone had been listening to his call. He grinned at General Valera.

"We won't have to wait long, General," Illya said. "But, you know, I wonder if I shouldn't meet General Hoyos after all?"

"Hoyos?" Valera said. "But we agreed that it was imperative to keep the government officially out of this? I can pass all but unseen, but General Hoyos could not."

Illya still smiled. "Of course, you're right. How are your roses growing?"

Valera stood immobile behind his desk. "Roses?"

"You do grow them?" Illya said.

Valera smiled. "Ah, yes. That would be in my dossier at U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, wouldn't it?"

Illya watched the general quizzically. "You admit it?"

Valera shrugged. "That I am Council Member 'L'? Why not? You must know, but—"

The U.N.C.L.E. special appeared in Illya's hand as if by magic. It was aimed at Valera. The general did not move.

"I think we will talk to General Hoyos," Illya said.

Valera laughed. "No, I think not."

"This is no joke, Valera," Illya said. "I have you—"

Illya said no more. Hands grabbed him from behind. His gun was knocked to the floor by a paralyzing blow. Before he could utter a sound, he was held as firmly as a trussed goose by three men who had crept up behind him silently. Valera bent and picked up the pistol. The general was smiling.

"It was the six nuclear-craft, wasn't it?" Valera said. "Yes, I realized that was a slip the instant I said it. I was not sure you had caught it, but I do not underestimate an opponent. That is why I am where I am, and why I will go farther."

Illya nodded, understandingly. "You alerted your men with some phrase in the message you gave me for Napoleon."

"You see, you are intelligent. Yes, the phrase 'an urgent affair' is my warning signal," Valera said, and the general motioned to his men. "Take him into the next office. We must wait until they bring Solo to me. It was very good of you to tell me just where to find Solo, Mr. Kuryakin. We will not have to wait long."

Valera laughed again. But this time, for once, the general was wrong.

FIVE

IN THE ROOM in the Hotel Splendide, Napoleon Solo put down the telephone receiver and rubbed his chin. So it was a trap, as they had suspected it might be. The utter secrecy, the dealing with Valera instead of General Hoyos, had had a false ring to it. Nothing the two agents could put their finger on, but a little odd. Everything had been too carefully arranged to send them straight to this country and General Valera.

Now Illya had confirmed their suspicions. The phrase "All is correct, naturally" was the signal that all was far from correct. If it had been correct, Illya would have said, "All is right," and not added the word, *naturally*. The call, then, was Valera's way of locating him. They would be knocking on the door in minutes.

Solo moved rapidly. He needed time now. It would not be enough to simply escape, to not be here when they came. If he did only that, they would immediately alert Valera, and Solo needed time. It was possible that Illya would escape, but he had to assume that Illya would not escape the trap.

He went to work. There was no telling how many of them there would be, and he would have to get them all and fast. He took the miniature tape recorder from his briefcase and set it in the bedroom of the suite. Across the door into

the bedroom, low near the floor, he set a trip wire attached to small gas bombs on either side.

This done, he took his briefcase and his U.N.C.L.E. special and went out into the corridor. He crossed the corridor to the room across the hall, an empty room rented by Illya for just such a purpose. Inside this room he stood just behind the door, with the door open a crack, and the door of his suite across the hall clearly visible.

In his pocket his left hand rested on the remote control of the tape recorder.

He was just fast enough.

The four men came down the corridor from the elevator—four soldiers with the insignia of the Defense Ministry staff. They were armed and they moved swiftly and with expert silence. They stopped in front of the door to 416. Solo clicked on the tape recorder with his remote control.

The four men cautiously opened the door to 416. Napoleon Solo smiled as his own voice came to him from the bedroom, his own voice talking to Waverly in New York. The four soldiers nodded to each other and entered the suite. Solo waited.

There was a short silence.

Then he heard a door kicked in, two sharp explosions low and muffled, and sudden screams.

Men were choking.

Solo stepped out into the corridor.

One man came running from the door of room 416. Solo shot him with a single sleep-dart. The man collapsed in the corridor. Solo grasped the heels of the man and dragged him into the suite. Inside he saw the other three men sprawled in the doorway to the bedroom. He dragged them all into the bedroom, closed and locked the bedroom door, and again left the suite.

He hung the *Do Not Disturb* sign on the corridor door, and walked away, grinning.

The whole incident had taken less than two minutes. The four soldiers would sleep for at least five hours. Solo went down the stairs and out into the street in front of the hotel. He saw the military car. The driver was reading a newspaper. Solo stepped into the rear seat and closed the door. His U.N.C.L.E. special rested with the muzzle against the driver's neck.

"The Defense Ministry, and very fast."

The driver said nothing, but put the car into gear and drove off. Five minutes later they pulled up a block from the Defense Ministry. Solo reached out and gently squeezed the driver's neck. The driver collapsed where he sat. Solo pulled the man into the back seat, bound and gagged him, and locked the car.

Moments later he stood in front of the Ministry of Defense. The

only men in sight were two bored guards on the entrance. Solo saw General Valera's grey Bentley.

Casually, Solo walked past the grey touring car. As he reached the rear bumper he appeared to drop his briefcase. He bent to pick it up and then walked on and away around the nearest corner.

The soldiers on guard had seen nothing, but in the instant of bending Solo had placed a tiny vial beneath the rear bumper of the grey Bentley.

Then he returned to the military car, got in, and sat waiting where he could see the grey Bentley.

* * *

UPSTAIRS, in the office of General Valera, the general himself paced and looked at his watch. A half an hour had passed and there was no Solo and no report from his men. Valera pressed a button. Three armed guards brought Illya in from the next office.

"So," Valera said, "you warned him. I should have guessed. However, it will do you no good. He will be found, and you will not be found. Prepare him!"

Two guards held Illya's arms. The third stood in front of him with a hypodermic needle filled with a pale blue fluid. The third guard bared Illya's arm and injected the fluid. Valera smiled.

"A small precaution," Valera said.

Illya tried to answer, but nothing happened. He tried again. He could not speak.

"You have seen the effects of *metabala-G,* I believe?" Valera said. "That is one of the wonders of science. Dr. Guerre made the drug to counteract the effects of excessive speed on a human. It proved to have an interesting side-effect that may be of even greater use, eh? Now, even if you escape or your friend finds you, you will be able to tell him nothing!"

And Valera laughed aloud, as if mocking Illya with the sound of his voice. Then he went to the telephone and ordered Solo located and captured if possible, killed if necessary.

"Come," the gaunt general said. "We have wasted enough time. Your friend will be found, and if he isn't he will not escape the city anyway. You wanted to find Project Condor, and now you will!"

Valera led the way from his office down a secret stairway where no one could see him, or his men, or his prisoner. In the street he strode straight to his grey Bentley. Moments later the car drove away.

Some five minutes after that the stolen military car, with Solo at the wheel, drove after the Bentley. Solo wore a pair of strange goggles. On the road he saw, through the goggles, the trail of small red dots that dropped from the vial he had planted. The vial would drip for twenty-four hours, could not be

erased in any way, and could be seen only through the special goggles.

Sixteen hours later, just as dawn was breaking over the coast and the thick jungle-like swamps, Solo followed the tell-tale trail of the Bentley to the edge of a narrow stretch of open water. He saw where a ferry-boat had picked up the car and carried it across into what looked a like an island in the coastal swamps.

He left his car, took his briefcase and weapons, and eased into the water. He swam softly in the still dark morning. He crawled cautiously out on the other side. The trail of his vial led off along a narrow dirt road. He followed it silently.

The sun was up when he reached the end of the trail. The grey Bentley stood in front of a strange-looking windowless concrete building.

Solo could guess what the building was—an immense atomic reactor pile.

But it was another odd-shaped building that caught his eye. He crept through the jungle-like growth to this building.

Its size was staggering to the mind, at least as wide as a regulation football field.

It was shaped like the dome of an observatory, like a giant beehive. Above it was heavy camouflage. Solo studied it and saw a ring of windows at ground level. Up close it was so large it faded away out of sight on either side as it curved in its circle. He reached a window and looked in. What he saw was more staggering than the size of the giant building.

He saw a tall metal column. It towered high into the dome, and seemed to stand in a deep hole in the ground.

The column itself was at least a hundred feet wide and over a hundred feet high.

Attached to the column half way up he saw the six black nuclear aircraft with their stubby wings.

For a long minute he could not believe what he was seeing. Men climbed ladders and went in and out of the giant column. He looked at where it entered the earth and faded away below.

He knew what he was seeing, but he did not want to believe it, in all its horror.

The column was the payload end of the largest rocket he had ever seen.

A rocket that could only lift off under more concentrated power than he had ever heard could be developed.

And the payload end was only one possible thing—a space station intended to orbit. *A space station that carried six deadly nuclear aircraft.*

A space station that could dominate the Earth.

Project Condor!

ACT IV
FOR WANT OF A NAIL

THE FOUR soldiers of the 16th Regiment rode in the jeep through the swamp, driving carefully on the dirt road. A scouting party, they watched the jungle and narrow waterways carefully. It was the corporal himself who saw the man come out of the brush.

"Look there!" the corporal cried in Spanish.

The man who came out of the bush was covered in mud from head to foot, his clothes dripping. He waved frantically at the soldiers of the 16th Regiment. The soldiers slowed and kept their weapons pointed at him.

"You will remain completely motionless, *senor,*" the corporal said in Spanish. And to his men, "Search him."

"Listen, my name is Napoleon Solo. I have to see your commander immediately!" Solo said.

After his one long look at the gigantic rocket with its deadly space station, Solo had managed to retrace his steps and swim back to the mainland. But his stolen car had been gone, and he had seen the tracks of many men wearing boots. He was sure that no Thrush men had left the swamp island, and realized that the Government had undoubtedly sent men, probably under the command of General Valera. Only Valera was on the island, not with the soldiers.

He had begun to look for the soldiers.

He searched as quickly as he could in the trackless jungle swamps—there was no telling just when the space station would be launched. Valera had come here, so it was probably soon. Now, with the soldiers watching him suspiciously, he tried to convince them of the urgency.

"It's vitally important," Solo said in Spanish.

The corporal eyed him suspiciously. "You are not of our country, Senor?"

"No, I'm an American: I'm working with General Hoyos!" Solo said.

"North Americano?" the corporal said, in English now.

One of the soldiers who had

searched Solo showed the U.N.C.L.E. special and the briefcase filled with strange-looking objects and weapons to the corporal. The corporal looked at Solo's equipment.

"So? A Yankee who carries a pistol and is found walking alone in a swamp? I think the commander, he will also want to see you, *Senor.*"

Ten minutes later Solo stood before a short, dark man in the uniform of a full colonel. The colonel, one Colonel Montoya, Commander of the 16th Regiment, had examined his briefcase and pistol.

"You say this is an U.N.C.L.E. weapon, that the case is the same, and that you are named Napoleon Solo, an agent for that organization?"

"Yes, Colonel, and can we hurry? They have a space station they are going to launch!" Solo explained.

"A space station? From the island in the swamp?" Montoya said. "It is quite a story, Mr. Solo, if that is indeed your true name."

"You have my credentials!" Solo snapped. "Colonel, I have friends, prisoners on that island. I have to get in there and help them! I came out to give General Hoyos a chance to get here and stop the launch."

Colonel Montoya sat down on his camp stool inside the field tent.

"Mr. Solo, again if that is truly your name," Montoya said. "Do you take me for a fool? You think I do not know that my men are here for some important project? Only you continue to talk about General Hoyos, when it is General Valera who commands this mission. If you were what you say you are, would you not know that? Would you not ask for General Valera?"

Solo studied the short, dark colonel. The soldier had the ring of truth in his voice, and yet? Thrush men were well trained. If Valera was a Thrush man, then why not Montoya? Only Solo had a hunch. In a country like this, men protected themselves. With Valera in command, General Hoyos would probably have assigned a second in command loyal to himself, Hoyos. Anyway, he had to take the chance.

"Because I am pretty sure that General Valera is the leader on the other side," Solo said. "I think General Valera is the man in charge of Project Condor. He has taken my partner prisoner, and has him on that island in the swamp."

Montoya slowly twirled his dark mustache. "General Valera, you say?"

The dark colonel stared hard at Solo. Montoya did not leap to Valera's defense, did not fly into a rage of outraged honor. Instead the colonel seemed to be thinking, considering, watching Solo very carefully.

"You tell me that General Valera is actually a traitor?"

"I think he is a top leader of Thrush. You've heard of Thrush?"

Montoya nodded slowly. "I have heard of this Thrush."

"Then you know how dangerous this affair is. You have to get through to General Hoyos," Solo said. "You can check up on why Valera isn't here where he should be!"

A tall, gaunt figure loomed in the entrance to the field tent. The cadaverous face stared at Solo and then at Colonel Montoya. Montoya had leaped to his feet at the sight of the tall man.

"But he is here, and if you have anything to ask, ask Valera himself!"

General Miguel Valera stood in the doorway flanked by four of his special staff. They were all armed. Solo looked at the armed men, and at Montoya.

"Who is this man, Colonel Montoya?" General Valera asked.

"He claims to be one Napoleon Solo of an organization named The United Network Command For Law and Enforcement."

Valera snorted. "A spy! Shoot him!"

"His credentials seem genuine," Montoya said.

"Forged, my dear Montoya. Anyone can forge a set of U.N.C.L.E. credentials, especially a Thrush agent," Valera said.

"He claims that you are a Thrush leader, General," Montoya said.

"And do you believe him, Colonel Montoya?" Valera snapped.

"Of course not, but, with your permission, his credentials should be checked," Montoya said.

"Shoot him! I, Valera, take responsibility!"

Montoya stared straight ahead. "With your permission, my General, you are not empowered to shoot without a trial."

"Empowered? Fool, I command in the field! That is all the power I need, you know that," Valera snapped.

"With your permission, such power was removed by General Hoyos when he assumed the Defense post. Article Twelve of the new Military Code."

"The devil with Article Twelve," Valera snapped. "But if it bothers you, Colonel, I will simply take your prisoner off your hands. You agree I am 'empowered' to do that much?"

"Yes, General," Montoya said "But, with your permission, I think the matter should be taken to General Hoyos. This man has, of course, made some mistake about you, but he may well be who he claims to be, and—"

Valera stared at Montoya. The eyes of the gaunt general were grim and careful.

"I see," Valera broke in. "General Hoyos, eh? And if I take your prisoner, you will, of course, imme-

diately inform General Hoyos of that fact?"

"Of course. It would be my clear duty," Montoya said.

Valera nodded. A pistol seemed to appear in his thin hand. There was a sharp, soft cracking sound. Montoya seemed to leap backwards and sprawl out flat on the ground. Valera held his silenced pistol and looked down at the dead man. Then he holstered the pistol.

"Come," Valera said to his men. "Bring Solo."

Outside, Valera called over two of the soldiers of Headquarters Company of the 16th Regiment. The soldiers stood at rigid attention.

"Colonel Montoya does not wish to be disturbed," Valera said crisply. "Is that clear? I will return later, see that no one bothers the colonel at his work."

"Yes, General," the soldiers said in unison.

"Very good," Valera said. And to his men, "Bring the prisoner."

Solo was marched to the grey Bentley and pushed inside. The touring car drove off. Once out of sight of the soldiers of the Sixteenth Regiment, the grey car turned toward the island in the swamp where the space station waited to be launched. Valera smiled.

"So, Mr. Solo, now we have you all."

"They'll find Montoya," Solo said.

"Of course. But what will they learn from a dead man?"

Valera began to laugh aloud.

TWO

SOLO STOOD in the dark night. The four guards watching him. Valera faced an angry Dr. Guerre. The cherubic little man still looked like some rotund pixie despite his anger.

"Kill them or throw him into the pit with the others, Council Member," Guerre said. "We have wasted too much time on them as it is. We will have to launch at dawn; they will find Montoya! Did you have to kill him? Stupid!"

"They will learn nothing from a dead man," Valera snapped. "And may I remind you who is in charge here?"

"You may remind me forever," Guerre roared, "but it is my project! I have waited too long to let you ruin it. Do you think I need a computer to tell me that Waverly will put two and two together once Hoyos informs him of Montoya's death? Those soldiers saw you in that tent, you fool! They will talk to anyone."

Valera turned purple with anger. "How dare you call—"

"Oh shut up! The space station goes at dawn; we cannot risk discovery! When will you Thrush fools learn that Waverly is as good or better than your damned computer!? Kill them now, if you have

to. That is about what you are good for, to kill gadflies!"

Valera boiled with rage. "You take care of your project, Dr. Guerre; leave U.N.C.L.E. to me. You did not do very well with them in New Mexico. I think they are too valuable to kill. Once Condor is in orbit, we will still need other information. Condor alone will not bring us the world."

"Then throw this one into the pit with the others and be damned!" Guerre raged. "I have work!"

The fat little man turned and waddled off into the night. Valera, still in a rage, barked an order. The four men hustled Solo to the edge of a yawning pit. Valera turned and strode off after Guerre, his eyes blazing with rage against the fat Doctor. The four men bound Solo's hands, looped a rope under his arms, and lowered him into the pit.

On the bottom Solo lay in soft dirt. He felt the rope jerk; then it was loose and going up. He saw the faint faces of the four soldiers far-off above. The pit was at least thirty feet deep. Solo lay there struggling in his bonds. Then he heard a noise. The face of Illya Kuryakin peered down at him. The blond agent grinned and went to work on his ropes.

A few moments later Solo sat up, free. He smiled at Illya.

"At least we can play cards, if we had any cards," Solo said.

Illya shook his head.

"You don't feel like talking?" Solo said.

Illya shook his head again, pointed to his mouth. Solo stared. Illya pointed to his mouth, shook his head, shrugged.

"You can't talk?" Solo said. "They used that drug on you?"

Illya nodded, pointed off into the dark at the bottom of the pit. Solo looked and saw a figure. The figure moved, sat up. It was Penny Parsons. At least the girl was still alive, but there was fear in her eyes.

"Did they drug her too?" Solo asked.

Illya nodded. The girl just stared as if in a trance. Solo looked around.

"At least they left us our clothes again. Shoes, too, this time," Solo said.

Illya held out his flat suitcase. Then the blond agent pointed up, and at the walls, and shrugged, tossed the case away. Solo watched Illya, and then walked and touched the walls of the pit. Soft dirt everywhere.

There was no hold, nothing but dirt towering thirty feet up.

Solo nodded. "I see what you mean. Our weapons are all designed for the twentieth century; they're useless against a pit of simple dirt. So they didn't bother to take them."

Illya nodded.

"We can cut through metal, wood, concrete. We can blow up

doors and locks. But what do you do against dirt?"

Illya shrugged. Solo laughed.

"Well, nothing is all bad," Solo said. "It's the first time I've ever seen you speechless."

Illya glared. Solo laughed again. The girl, Penny Parsons, began to cry. Solo looked around.

"There must be some way out," Solo said.

Illya nodded and pointed off to the left. Solo saw a hole in the side of the pit. A large hole like a passage that seemed to lead downward. Solo studied it and nodded.

"This pit is connected to something else," Solo said. "Do you know where it leads?"

Illya nodded, and shrugged.

"Well, we have to try something. Maybe you missed a way out. Let's go."

Illya nodded again. The two agents took hold of Penny Parsons and led the girl to the large hole. They crawled into the hole with Solo leading.

The passage led downward at a sharp angle. It seemed to go on and on. But at last Solo saw light ahead. They emerged in an enormous underground chamber. Solo looked around. Many other holes led off all around the circular chamber. Illya pointed up.

Solo looked up and saw the gigantic base of the space station launching rocket. The rocket engines protruded from the base, ten of the largest engine cones he had ever seen. And they were different in appearance. Solo looked at Illya.

"Nuclear engines?" Solo said.

Illya nodded.

"This is the blast chamber. The passages to the pits are to give escape for the exhaust gases when it lifts off," Solo said.

Illya nodded. The small Russian indicated a sudden explosion, gas spreading out and into the exhaust holes, and filling the pits beyond. Then Illya indicated the end, finished. Solo nodded.

"The gases will finish us. Is there a way out of this chamber, maybe up along the rocket?" Solo asked.

Illya indicated that they could try. Solo looked around and saw the steel ladder that led up the side of the chamber to a platform on a level with the engine above. He walked to the ladder and climbed up to the stage. Illya came up behind him. On the platform the two agents looked at the rocket, and then upward.

There was no way up the sheer steel sides of the rocket pit. Solo shrugged and leaned out. He reached the tail section of the rocket itself and pulled himself up. Illya walked around and did the same on the other side. Slowly, painfully, both men pulled themselves up over the gigantic tail section.

Solo reached the end of the tail section. Above him the monster rocket stretched round and smooth. There was nothing more to hold

on to and the steel-sided pit faded away above. Solo tried, but it was no use. He slid, slipped, and fell back to the tail section. There was no way up.

On the platform he waited. Illya appeared. Obviously the small Russian had had no better luck. The two men descended the ladder and rejoined Penny Parsons on the bottom. The deadly engines towered above them. Solo looked at the hundreds of holes all around to allow the ignition gases to escape.

"Well, we might as well see if they lead anywhere better than our original pit," Solo said.

Illya shrugged and the girl began to cry again. Solo patted her heaving shoulders.

"We might find something," Solo said.

But they did not.

They searched all the exhaust passages, but found nothing but more pits exactly like the one they had been dropped into. They split up and searched. There was nothing.

Dawn light tinged the open space above the pits. A hum had begun somewhere. The rocket was being readied. Then Illya came out of a side passage and nodded his blond head eagerly. The small Russian picked up his flat suitcase and motioned for Solo and the girl to follow.

The hum of engines warming grew louder.

Solo crawled along the dark passage behind the girl. Illya was up ahead. They emerged into another pit—a pit exactly like all the others they had reached. Solo swore.

"Damn it, Illya, this is—"

Illya pointed up. Solo looked up to where a very faint dawn light showed some kind of object hanging over the pit.

Solo narrowed his eyes and looked at the object. Then he saw what it was—a crane!

Above this pit there was a crane and boom hanging out over the hole itself. A crane intended to lower material into the pit. The cable of the crane dangled tantalizingly over the pit.

If they could somehow manage to reach it.

THREE

ILLYA OPENED his small suitcase and brought out the tiny electronic meter and activator. Solo looked at the tiny instrument designed to activate any electrically-controlled device. Then he looked up at the crane. It was just possible . . .

"If it can range that far," Solo said.

Illya's quizzical eyes smiled, indicated that the range was okay; the question was whether or not the crane was electrically operated and controlled.

"What have we got to lose?" Solo said.

Illya set the controls of the tiny

actuator and aimed it upward. There was a silence.

Illya increased the power in the actuator.

Nothing happened.

The two agents looked at each other. Somewhere the hum of the nuclear engines pre-heating grew louder.

Illya slowly changed the direction of the electronic signal from the actuator, revolving the instrument in his hands.

Above an engine coughed, missed, struggled—and went on.

The crane began to vibrate. The sound was that of a gasoline engine, started by an electric spark.

"Now, are the controls electric?" Solo said. "Give it the gun, my Russian optimist."

Illya twisted the control dial on the actuator. There was a grinding of gears above, a whirring of a drum, and the cable began to move upward.

"Quick!" Solo cried. "If it reaches the top it could jam!"

Illya reversed the controls. There was a loud grinding of gears. The crane boom above shuddered as the gears reversed. The whole machine above shook, hesitated.

At the bottom of the pit, Solo and Illya watched.

Illya increased the power on the actuator the fraction of a turn. The crane shook—and the cable started down. It came down fast now. When it reached the bottom Illya stopped it with a flick of the control. There was a large cargo sling at the end.

Solo went first, his foot in the stirrup of the cargo sling, holding to the cable, riding up. He crouched and peered out as he was raised clear of the edge. There was no one near.

Penny Parsons came up next, then Illya.

In the faint light of dawn a thick mist rose from the swamp all around the island. Vague figures moved in the mist far off. Solo and Illya kept the girl between them as they advanced warily, unable to see more than twenty feet.

The mist that hid their enemies from them, hid them from their enemies. Men passed close to them in the thick white mist and did not even glance at them. The base was a beehive of activity. None of the men who passed them were armed until, suddenly they came out into an open space in front of a thick-walled concrete building.

The mist has thinned. It still hung heavy over the water of the swamp that surrounded the island, but here it had thinned. Two armed men stood in front of the main doorway into the building. Illya nodded to Solo. The two agents warned Penny Parsons to stay where she was, and vanished into the swirling mist.

They appeared from either side at the same instant, each creeping up close along the wall behind one of the two guards. Both guards fell

without a sound, chopped across the neck. Solo and Illya scooped up their weapons, motioned to Penny to come ahead, and the three of them went into the building.

Solo led the way down broad corridors that were strangely deserted. Illya pointed to an open door far down a wide main corridor. There was light in the doorway. The three approached the doorway carefully. Solo peered around the corner, his Thrush rifle ready.

He saw a large office. There was a desk, leather chairs, all the appointments of the office of some high executive—and a large computer! A door stood open to the left. Even as Solo watched, the computer began to operate, flashing lights and the whirring of a thousand tiny electronic circuits.

Solo looked at Illya. The blond agent came to the door and looked in.

"The Ultimate Computer?" Solo said, watching the awesome machine blinking and whirring.

Illya shook his head. No. With his mobile hands the Russian indicated that this was a smaller copy, a field model of the heart of Thrush operations, but worth destroying. The two agents stepped into the room.

As a man came through the open door to the left.

General Miguel Valera froze as he saw them. His hand moved to his holster. Illya motioned with his stolen Thrush rifle. Valera hesitated, seemed to glance for an instant behind him, then shrugged and moved his hand away from his weapon. The gaunt Thrush council member walked casually into the center of the room.

"So, again you surprise us. Someday, perhaps, we will learn not to underestimate the resourcefulness of U.N.C.L.E. agents. Or perhaps it is just you two, and, of course, Waverly. Guerre was right; I should have killed you. Now, of course, you will kill me."

Solo smiled. "Not necessarily; we need information, too. Where is Dr. Guerre?"

Valera shrugged. "Alas, I do not know. Preparing the launch, I imagine. I suggest we all leave here very soon. You have noted, I trust, the absence of personnel in this building?"

"What does that mean?" Solo said.

Valera looked at Illya and Penny Parsons. The gaunt Thrush leader grinned. "I see your friends are still speechless. Too bad."

"What do you mean by the absence of personnel?" Solo said again.

Illya suddenly touched Solo's arm. The small blond agent made motions to indicate a rocket flight and an explosion. Valera watched, nodded.

"Yes, Mr. Kuryakin understands. You see, Solo, the launch will go off any moment, and this

building will not be safe. All our men are in their shelters. I think you would do wise to give yourselves up to me and allow me to lead you to shelter."

The tall, gaunt Valera was a man of cool nerve. In the face of two rifles trained on his heart he was making his threat, his bid to reserve the situation. But Illya shook his head, pointed to the sky and then the ground. Solo nodded.

"Yes," Solo said. "I think, General, it would be better for you to lead us to the control room so we can stop the launching. You must know—"

Solo sensed, rather than heard, the movement behind him. He whirled. Illya whirled. There was a single shot and Illya fell, clutching his shoulder.

Maxine Trent stood in the doorway, her pistol in her hand.

"Drop it, Napoleon," the beautiful agent said.

Solo hesitated.

"Come, come, Napoleon. You must know that this is it. I will really have to kill you this time. General, take his weapon!"

The general stepped forward. Solo raised his rifle. Maxine smiled viciously and swung the tiny muzzle of her pistol down to point straight at Solo's heart. He knew that she would beat him.

But she did not. She had forgotten Penny Parsons.

The lab girl, against the wall and out of Maxine's sight, jumped forward. Maxine, her eyes concentrated on Solo, her mind already enjoying this moment when she would at last kill Napoleon Solo, did not see Penny until too late. The lab girl struck her with the full force of her body. Maxine's shot went wild into the ceiling.

The pistol skidded away across the floor. Solo leaped after it. Maxine whirled, clawed at Penny Parsons. The lab girl, in a fury of rage at all that had been done to her, attacked in silence and Maxine sprawled on the floor, her skirt flying up above her beautiful legs. Solo dived for the pistol.

Valera reached the pistol first, grabbed it, dropped to one knee, raised the small gun and aimed straight at the onrushing Solo. There was a shot, a second shot, and Valera fell over backwards.

Solo reached the pistol and picked it up. He whirled to see Illya lying prone on the floor, his rifle still pointing at General Valera.

Solo bent over Valera. The General opened his eyes.

"Damn you!" Valera whispered. "Gone—all gone. Damn you . . . I would have—ruled . . . the . . . world!" And then Valera smiled once more. "But . . . too . . . late . . . for . . . you . . . too! I stopped . . . you! The . . . door . . . too late . . ."

Valera fell back. Dead.

Illya, his left arm dangling, struggled to his feet. Solo faced around to cover Maxine Trent.

Penny Parsons sat dazed on the floor, and Maxine was gone. Illya limped across the room to the door that stood open in the left wall of the large office. Solo went to stand with the Russian.

They were looking into a small, steel-lined room with walls covered with filing cabinets. Across this room was a wall half glass and half steel, with another room beyond the glass-and-steel wall.

The room behind the glass-and-steel wall was filled with instruments and consoles. Lights blinked all through this second room. On the far side of the second room there was a large window, and through the window the launching area was clearly visible.

They saw the gigantic nose section of the launching rocket through the far window, the space station with its six deadly nuclear aircraft.

The space station and nuclear aircraft were quivering out on the launching pad.

The room behind the glass-and-steel wall was what they had been looking for—the main control room!

And the cherubic face of Dr. Ernesto Guerre smiled at them from inside the control room.

"Valera fooled us!" Solo muttered. "He held us out there in the office while the control room was here all the time!"

Illya raised his stolen Thrush rifle and fired a point-blank burst at the glass-and-steel wall.

The bullets bounced off.

Inside the control room Dr. Guerre laughed, and reached to press a button. A voice suddenly seemed to fill the steel outer room.

"Three hundred and counting down. Two-ninety-nine . . . two-ninety-eight . . . two-ninety-seven . . . two-ninety-six . . . two-ninety-five . . ."

Solo said, "Five minutes. Maybe we have time to blast through that door!"

Illya grabbed his shoulder, pulled him.

"Do we have enough explosive?" Solo asked.

Illya shook his head, pulled Solo.

"But we've got to stop the launch!" Solo insisted.

Illya shook his head again, negative, and turned and ran from the room. Solo went after him. In the large office Illya was helping Penny Parsons to her feet. Solo grabbed him.

"We've got to stop it, Illya!" Solo said.

Illya motioned with his hands, a motion of flight and then diving back to earth. Illya motioned an explosion and laughed. Then the small Russian indicated the need for quick and determined flight.

The counting voice continued. "Two-hundred-sixty . . . two-fifty-nine . . . two-fifty-eight . . . two-fifty-seven . . . two-fifty-six . . ."

Solo had one last look at the grinning and triumphant face of

the cherubic Dr. Ernesto Guerre as the fat little man stared at them through the glass-and-steel wall of the control room.

FOUR

THE MIST HAD begun to burn off out in the open beyond the main building. Solo, Illya and Penny Parsons ran across the deserted swamp island toward the narrow stretch of water that separated it from the mainland of the swamp.

There was no one in sight; the entire secret base was deserted. In its launching silo the gigantic space station quivered on the end of the giant rocket.

The three reached the edge of the water and plunged in without an instant of hesitation. They swam across and emerged wet and sliding in the mud on the far side.

They staggered up the bank and into the first line of swamp jungle growth.

Illya Kuryakin looked at his watch and urged them on.

They came out on a dirt road. Voices shouted at them. Six soldiers wearing the insignia of the 16th Regiment covered them. A captain stepped forward.

"Who are you, quick?" the captain snapped in Spanish.

"Agents of U.N.C.L.E., we're working with—" Solo began.

The captain broke in. "You are Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin?" he said in English.

"Yes," Solo said, "but how—"

Illya caught his arm, indicated speed and quick escape. Solo faced the captain.

"We better get away from here fast, Captain."

The captain nodded. Already the earth was shaking as the space station was about to blast off. The captain whistled and a command car appeared.

They all piled in and the driver tore off along the road away from the swamp land.

They drove fast and Illya sat in the rear looking back. The whole land was shaking now as the nuclear engines of the launching rocket began to gain full power.

The command car heaved and lurched on the road as the ground shook. Illya looked at his watch.

They passed other vehicles with soldiers, and the captain waved them all to go to the rear. The soldiers needed no urging, the ground trembling as if in the grip of an earthquake.

There were more and more soldiers now, all wearing the insignia of the 16th Regiment, and all armed in full battle gear.

Suddenly, Illya touched Solo's shoulder and pointed to the direction from which they had come. The earth was shivering madly now.

Solo looked back and saw it.

The space station, with its six black nuclear craft attached, had risen above the swamp, far back.

Half the rocket was visible now, rising slowly, so very slowly.

Solo could not believe, even now, the size of the gigantic launch vehicle. It seemed to fill the horizon. So big it seemed on top of them, although it was many miles away now.

The vehicle climbed so slowly higher, gathering speed.

The tail section appeared.

Then the mighty engines, blasting great sheets of flame that seared the swamp growth beneath them.

Illya gripped Solo's shoulder.

The rocket moved clear of all the vegetation, seemed to hang there in the air, an impossibly giant rocket moving slowly upward, gathering speed.

"It's making it!" Solo cried.

Illya's fingers dug into his shoulder.

Then the monstrous space vehicle seemed to hesitate, falter.

For a long second it hung there, still moving, but somehow leaning.

It seemed to shudder once.

And then it tilted, turned, began to shake like a tall tree in a high wind.

With a final shudder it fell over on its side and crashed back to earth. It fell over so slowly and seemed to float gently back down. Slowly, and then faster, and faster, until it hurtled down sideways and vanished beneath the swamp growth.

A mighty sheet of flame shot skyward.

The flames engulfed the entire island like a giant tidal wave.

Then the shock wave came.

The command car was picked up as if a giant hand and hurled off the road. It landed upright in the swamp, men flung all around.

Napoleon Solo picked himself up out of the mud. Penny Parsons was sitting up, grinning as she looked back to where the swamp island was a mass of flames.

Illya Kuryakin struggled in the muck, holding his wounded shoulder, but grinning as Solo came to help him up.

"All right, my grinning Russian, how did you do it?" Solo said.

Illya reached into his pocket and held up a tiny threaded bolt. The bolt was two inches long, no more than a quarter of an inch wide.

"You took it out of the rocket?" Solo said. "When we climbed up the tail?"

Illya nodded and began to laugh soundlessly.

On the road many soldiers were slowly advancing. Solo and Illya turned to face them. Walking calmly ahead of the soldiers they saw General Hoyos and the tweedy figure of Alexander Waverly. The U.N.C.L.E. Chief was tapping at his pipe, looking annoyed.

* * *

IN THE small, sunny office of Alexander Waverly, the New York skyline outside through the win-

dow, Solo, Illya and Penny Parsons sat around the revolving table.

Alexander Waverly sucked on his cold pipe.

"So, I imagine it's good to have your speech back again, Mr.—uh—Kuryakin. And you too, Miss Parsons. No serious ill-effects, I hope?"

"No," Penny said, smiling. "I'm glad I was able to help. I feel I owed it to Mark. He got mixed up in something evil and it killed him. I wanted to try to help make it up."

"And so you did," Waverly said. "General Hoyos informs me that they identified the bodies of Wozlak and Dr. Guerre in what was left of the Thrush installation. Everything was totally destroyed; there will be no space station or nuclear engines. Our various governments are still checking on any other rocket pilots involved in the affair, but the matter is essentially closed."

And Waverly smiled one of his rare smiles toward Illya. "Destroyed for want of a nail, you might say, eh, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Illya grinned.

"Even a rocket is no better than its smallest part," the small Russian said.

"The removal of that one bolt destroyed the operation of the tail stabilizers," Solo said. "Boom! Was there much nuclear radiation as a result?"

"Very little, actually. Dr. Guerre was a good scientist, if not quite sane. The nuclear bombs in that space station were not armed. The only radiation came from the rocket engine."

"I was wondering about my friend Maxine?" Solo said. "Were there any survivors on that confounded island?"

"None, Mr. Solo," Waverly said, and began to light his pipe. "However, General Hoyos later learned that you were not the first one off that island. It seems one of his patrols, like the one that picked you up, picked up a lone woman earlier. She fits the description of Maxine Trent, I'm afraid."

"What happened to her?" Penny Parsons asked.

"No one seems to know," Waverly said. "It appears that the entire patrol deserted after capturing her. The various men of that patrol have been found all over Caracas, in varying stages of drunkenness, but Maxine has vanished. The soldiers do not appear to regret their escapade. They say it was worth it."

"That's my Maxine for you," Solo said.

Illya smiled his enigmatic smile. "Some day that woman will finish you, Napoleon."

"I know—but what a way to go," Solo said.

Even Waverly smiled suddenly as Napoleon Solo sighed in the sunny room.

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

The fighting face of a fighter—Miami's famed private detective. He's still crime fiction's one and only perennial favorite son—craggy-jawed, redheaded Mike Shayne, who takes his danger straight, his crime crooked and his bourbon without a chaser. For well over a hundred consecutive issues MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE *has headlined Brett Halliday's private eye. Now, bigger and more star-studded than ever, this magazine will continue to feature a complete Mike Shayne adventure in every issue—together with stories by world famous authors. Reserve your next month's issue now. You will join the millions of crime-caper buffs who have acclaimed Mike Shayne as America's all-time favorite crime-busting headliner!*

Hoodoo House

by JOHN REESE

MISS UNITY Dexter was alone in the office when the client came storming in, demanding to get out of the deal.

"My wife refuses to set foot in that house, and I don't blame her," he raged. "You didn't tell us a murder had been committed there. I want my money back!"

"I'm afraid that's impossible," said Miss Unity. "A deal is a deal, and thirty thousand dollars for that place, completely furnished, is a fantastic bargain. After all, I'm only the agent for the bank that is handling the estate, and—"

"You've got a thousand bucks of my money. I want it back," the man interrupted furiously.

Miss Unity blinked, and her plump, pretty face filled with compassion. She never tried to hide her age, which was fifty-two, and as a result never looked it. Her hair was frankly gray, but her figure was good, and her taste in clothing excellent. Her eyes, which were large and blue, had something childlike in them. Her skin was perfect, her legs a little matronly, but quite lovely, and those who compared her to a middle-aged schoolteacher were inevitably thinking of a beloved one.

"I'll stop payment on the check," the client said.

"That wouldn't do any good," Miss Unity said, in distress. "You signed a purchase order. The bank will just sue you and make you go through with the deal. There was no deceit! Why, I even told you there was a gas leak in the house that had to be fixed! The Cronin murder was such a sensational case, and there were so many pic-

The house was beautiful, completely desirable in every way—save one. Murder had lived there—and Murder would again!

tures of the house in the papers, that I'm afraid a court would hold that you were on notice. After all, death comes to all of us and if we couldn't sell a house in which death had occurred—"

"But murder is different," the client insisted. "Imagine sleeping in the bedroom where—ugh! Tell you what, m'am—have you turned this deal in yet?"

"That has nothing to do with it. We are bound—"

"Listen. You're entitled to five percent as your commission. That would come to one thousand, five hundred dollars. You already have my check for one thousand dollars. I'll write that much off, just to get out of the deal, and you'll still have the house to sell to someone else."

Miss Unity shook her head. "I'm sorry, no. A deal is a deal. I couldn't cash your check. I'm a licensed real estate broker, and the State of California is very strict about these things. I'm terribly sorry that your wife is unhappy about the house, but I could lose my license, and I'm not a wealthy woman. Why, I can't even afford a house of my own! I support an older brother, you know. People like you can afford thirty thousand dollar houses, but I have to live in a trailer."

"Tell you what I'll do," said the client. "I'll come back here with fifteen crisp one hundred dollar bills, and my copy of the purchase order. We'll just tear up the check and all copies of the purchase order. You'll get your fee—in cash, so Internal Revenue can't even trace it—It's worth it to me to get out of the deal."

"Well-l-l—" said Miss Unity.

Two hours later, she was still alone in the office, but $1,500 richer, when she heard another car stop on the parking strip outside. Dexter Realty Company had its own six-room building on the heights above the South Bay; on a clear day, Miss Unity could see Catalina from her window.

This time, what she saw was a tall, big-boned, middle-aged man in a ready-made blue suit, getting out of a very ordinary sedan about three years old.

When the man came into the office, she saw that he had a dark, homely face distinguished by a rather large brown mole beside his nose.

"Now, I'm not really a serious buyer—not yet, anyway," he said. "My wife and I kind of like this area, though, and if I'm not taking up too much of your time—"

"Not at all!" Miss Unity cried. "There are just the two of you?"

"Yes, just Mrs. Honeycutt and myself."

"I think I have just the house for you! It's completely furnished, and the price is only thirty thousand dollars. It's priced for a quick sale. Why, if the owner was willing to wait, I could get thirty-five thousand dollars for the house alone,

without the furniture! But it's an estate, you see, and the bank wants to get it settled. The heirs want their money."

"That's very interesting."

"May I have your name and address?"

The man with the mole beside his nose said cautiously, "Lester A. Honeycutt, but as I told you, I'm just sort of window shopping for the moment."

"I can show you a lovely set of photographs of this house, interior and exterior. Of course we have many other listings, but I'm *so* anxious to accommodate the bank on this one, and at the same time give some lucky, lucky couple the bargain of a lifetime."

Mr. Honeycutt remained almost an hour. They went through the "book" together, and she showed him every listing. Just as he left, Miss Unity's brother arrived.

"The Cronin house is back on the market, Jesse," Miss Unity said briskly. "That fellow that just left —his name is Lester A. Honeycutt —I think I've got him hooked on it. So remember, if I make a deal, it's all mine."

"The other couple backed out?" said Jesse.

"Yes. We tore up the deal."

"And I suppose he paid off to get out of it."

"That would be none of your business if he did," Miss Unity said furiously, "but I can tell you this—we tore up his check, too, so if you were thinking of tapping me for any more money, forget it!"

"I wasn't, Unity. It doesn't seem quite ethical to me, though. This makes five times you've sold that murder house."

"I can't help it if a deal won't stick, can I?" said Miss Unity. "That's a beautiful property! And by the way, did you ever fix that gas leak?"

"I called the gas company. They—"

"Oh, nonsense! How can the gas company get into a locked house? Honestly, Jesse, you're absolutely no help to me. It seems to me the least you could do would be to take care of these little odd jobs that a woman can't do."

"Well, give me the keys. This afternoon or maybe tomorrow morning—"

"There'll be no more stalling, Jesse," Miss Unity said firmly. "You wait right here, and I'll go to the trailer and get the tools. Then I'll drive you over to that house myself. I want that leak fixed and the house aired out immediately, because I have a very strong feeling that a Mr. and Mrs. Honeycutt are going to want to look at it tomorrow."

Jesse Dexter sank down into the chair behind the desk in the outer office.

"All right," he sighed. "I'll fix the leak, but that's the last time I go into that house. I don't blame people for not wanting to live

there. It gives me the creeps just to go past it."

"You," said Miss Unity, "are an idiot."

She picked up her car keys and swept out, leaving her brother in sole possession of the office. Two years ago, the office had been shared by a public accountant and an insurance broker, when Miss Unity bought the building. Both had moved out, rather than pay the 20% increase in rent that she demanded.

The emptiness of the building did not bother Miss Unity, but her brother, when he was alone here, got the same creepy feeling that he got in the Cronin house.

Jesse Dexter was a bachelor of fifty-six, an excellent typographer who could not hold a job because of his appetite for booze.

He was not a steady drinker, and in fact sometimes went for as long as a year without it. But when he finally fell off the wagon, the crash was spectacular.

Jesse was taller than his sister, and somewhat gaunt, but the resemblance between them was still close. His eyes were blue, his features symmetrical, and his shock of gray hair gave him a rather wistful look of dignity. He had managed to pass the State examination, and had a license as a salesman, but he lacked his sister's dynamic vigor and warm personal charm.

He was, in short, a lousy salesman, and Miss Unity used him mostly as a flunky.

They had never gotten along as children, and Jesse was grateful that she took care of him after all these years.

He had turned up here just about the time she bought the building, so he had at least been sure of his food and a roof over his head for these two years. He had gone on three terrific alcoholic bats in that time, each time expecting that his sister would throw him out.

But though Miss Unity was brusque, though she scolded him in a way he would never have taken from anyone else, she never forgot that they were the last of the line of Dexters. Neither had ever married. When they died, a fine old family would become extinct.

Jesse was Miss Unity's sole heir, with a trustee to see that he did not squander it all on one of his bats.

Not that this would have been easy to do. There was some $150,000 in real estate, $35,000 in government bonds, and some pretty good common stocks whose value, at present quotations, was around $110,000.

She had worked hard all her life, living frugally and investing wisely, and only Jesse and her lawyer knew how much she was worth.

In addition, they had both taken out $100,000 in life insurance, shortly after Jesse, with an alco-

holic's lachrymose display of gratitude, came to work here. The policies were almost two years old now. If anything happened to Miss Unity, the estate that would devolve to Jesse would be worth $395,000—probably well over $400,000 by the time it was out of probate. Miss Unity's stocks seemed to keep right on rising, whatever the market did.

Left alone, Jesse could not help figuring. Say you got a net return of 3%, after trustee's fees—the income on $400,000 would be $12,000 a year. In addition, he was to get $6,000 a year from the principal, and that would be nontaxable. Also, the trustee was to pay "all necessary emergency medical, surgical and hospital costs, and such other extraordinary expenses as were necessary to insure his health, safety, comfort and dignity."

Not that dignity meant much to Jesse. He had a good room in a shabby hotel in Redondo Beach, and, like most alcoholics, ate sparingly. Neither food nor the surroundings in which he ate it were important to him.

Miss Unity was back in half an hour with the gunny-sack full of tools she had accumulated over her years of taking care of houses.

Jesse locked the office and got in the car with her, and they drove to the Cronin house.

"Pee-yew!" Miss Unity said, as they got out. "I can smell it from here. How am I going to show this house in this condition? Jesse, you're the limit!"

"Unity," he said, "I just hate to go into that house!"

"It's perfectly safe. Leave the door open and—"

"It's not the gas." Jesse took out his handkerchief and mopped his sweaty face. "It's the murder. I—I keep seeing that poor Mrs. Cronin. I keep hearing her screams. She died so hard!"

"Nonsense! It's just your nerves, Jesse. I'll go in with you until you get hold of yourself. Almost every house has had a death or two in it. This lawn bothers me far more. Honestly, there must be a million gophers in it! The bank won't pay enough for a gardener to take the time to get rid of them. Tomorrow, Jesse, you've got to come over here and poison those darned varmints."

The house was less than five years old, and on a clear day, Catalina was visible from its picture window. The lawn was kept cut and the utilities were still turned on, but the ruinous work of the gophers in the lawn was not the only sign of neglect here.

The walk needed sweeping, the windows needed washing, and someone had thrown a pop bottle at the front door.

The day was almost over, but the gloomy twilight did not seem to bother Miss Unity. Jesse watched her carefully, the gunny-sack full

of tools in his hand, as she briskly searched her big ring of keys for the right one. The door opened.

She led the way inside. Jesse swung the tools over his shoulder and followed her.

"It doesn't seem to be coming from this room," said Miss Unity. "It's probably the service porch or the kitchen—or maybe the heater in the back bathroom. Better get some air in here, Jesse, and I'd leave the lights out until it's well ventilated. A spark could ignite the gas and blow the house to smithereens."

"The back bath," Jesse gulped. "That's where the body was found, wasn't it?"

"Part of it," Miss Unity said absently. "The torso, I believe. He hadn't had time to dispose of it."

For a fairly small house, the Cronin place was expensively furnished. Two original oil paintings, which went with the place, had been valued at $500 each. The wall-to-wall carpeting was the best, and was in almost perfect condition.

The one flaw in it was a large spot, cleaner than the rest, where the late Mrs. Cronin had shed some blood. The Cronins had had inherited income. They followed the race tracks most of the year, but Mr. Cronin also followed younger women. It was here, just before the Santa Anita season opened, that Mrs. Cronin ran out of patience.

She also ran out of luck. According to the tale he at last narrated to the police, he had hit her here in the living room, splitting her scalp badly and knocking her cold. They had been shopping, preparatory to opening the house, and the weapon Mr. Cronin used was an iron skillet, wrapped in paper, that he happened to be carrying.

Mrs. Cronin had bled for about an hour, while Mr. Cronin considered what to do with the body. When suddenly she arose and began screaming, and he realized that he had a slightly different problem on his hands now, he tried to defend himself as best he could. Mrs. Cronin ran for the closet, where he kept his deer gun. He knocked her down with a dust mop. Dribbling blood, she ran for the kitchen and picked up a butcher knife. He parried it and felled her again, this time with a can of peaches.

She crawled down the hall to the bedroom, where she tried to hide under the bed. He dragged her out and choked her, but again she came to and tried to attack him. He beat her to death on the bed, using a bronze ash tray.

He took her body to the rear bath and dismembered it. In the next three days, he disposed of the head, legs and arms by burying them in various canyons in the Santa Monica mountains. He also cleaned up most of the blood.

He would have gotten the torso buried too, only Santa Anita opened, and he hated to miss it. Thus it was that the meter reader for the power company, happening to glance in the bathroom window, discovered the murder.

Mr. Cronin confessed quickly, but his memory was reliable only in race matters, and it was three weeks before his late wife had been assembled to the authorities' full satisfaction. Mr. Cronin was now studying the race charts in San Quentin, and waiting out the Supreme Court's long, slow review of his death sentence.

"Open a back window and get some cross-ventilation in here," Miss Unity said. "Honestly, this is the limit! I think some houses are just bad luck, and this one is such a lovely place! But if its not one darned thing, it's another."

"You haven't done so badly," Jesse grumbled. "How much did you make, selling it five times before they found out it was the Cronin place?"

"You're insulting. I work for my living! And you just watch—I'll take the curse off this house, too. Now do hurry, Jesse. Find the leak, fix it, air out the house, and make sure it's locked before you leave!"

"Unity—"

"Jesse, get that silly look off your face and get to work!" Miss Unity said sharply.

Jesse had taken a sixteen-inch pipe-wrench from the gunny-sack and was hefting it in his hand. "I was just thinking," he said softly, "that if he had clouted her with something like this, she would never have come to. Or if he had only thought ahead, and locked her in with a nice little gas leak—"

"Get a window open, you idiot!" said Miss Unity. "You're half swacked on gas fumes."

"Maybe. I do feel elated. It never occurred to me before, but murder is really a rather routine thing, if it's done right. Suppose I hit you over the head and then ran out screaming—you know, you got dizzy from the fumes, you fell and cut your head—and zowie, I'm a rich man!"

They were in the small dining-room. It had grown much darker. From where she stood, Miss Unity could see both places where Mrs. Cronin had been struck down—the living room, with the skillet, and the kitchen, with the can of peaches.

"I'm afraid your joke is in very bad taste, Jesse," she said tremulously.

"Maybe," said Jesse, "but it would be easier than poisoning gophers. I really have nothing against gophers, and nothing to gain from murdering them, either! On the other hand, you—"

"Open a window, Jesse. You're drunk! Very well, I'll open one myself."

Miss Unity went into the kitchen, unlocked a window over the

sink, and threw it up. She leaned over the sink to breathe deeply.

"The leak is somewhere back in this part of the house, but you had better get some fresh air before you try to fix it," she said. "Leave the tools and come outside for a moment."

They went out on the gopher-riddled lawn. Both breathed deeply. The man who lived in the house next door was watering his lawn.

"Hello there, Miss Unity!" he called. "Think you're ever going to sell that place? It would take a curse off the whole neighborhood if you could get a nice family living in there."

"Surely I'll sell it!" said Miss Unity. "But first we have to fix a bad gas leak, and then tomorrow my brother is going to get rid of the gophers in this lawn. I really don't know what to do! It's too dark in there for Jesse to fix the leak, and I don't think it's safe to turn on a light with all that gas in the house, do you?"

"I'll bring my flashlight and help," said the man. "Must be quite a leak. I've been smelling gas all over my own place all day."

"Oh, I do thank you so much, Mr. —?"

"Lampson," said the neighbor.

"It's so good of you, Mr. Lampson!" Miss Unity cried. "I'd do it myself—I'm really handier with tools than my brother—but while he's doing that, I'm going to run down to the nursery and get some gopher poison."

"You run along. We'll get it fixed. I'm glad to do anything to take the curse off this house!"

Miss Unity got into her car. She was just pulling into the nursery, a full ten blocks away, when it happened. First there was a vivid flash of light that illuminated an entire quarter of the horizon. Then came the wave of the detonation, and the deep, billowing roar.

Screaming, Miss Unity got back into her car and raced to the scene. The whole roof had been lifted off the Cronin house by the explosion. The walls had bulged, and then the roof had dropped. Everything was burning fiercely. There were even huge holes in the lawn, where gas-filled gopher-holes had suddenly become small but deep craters of destruction.

"Oh my God, my brother!" Miss Unity screamed. "He was inside. And Mr. Lampson—where's Mr. Lampson?"

Mrs. Lampson was screaming too by the time the first squad car arrived. Miss Unity volunteered to drive Mrs. Lampson to a doctor's office she knew about, a few blocks away. The harassed and uncertain young officers in the squad car consented gratefully.

"By all means get her out of here," they said. "There's nothing anyone can do, and she needs sedation."

Miss Unity fought her own tears

and, with the help of the officers, forced Mrs. Lampson into the car. There, the newly-widowed woman fainted.

"Poor thing, poor thing!" Miss Unity sobbed, as she got under the wheel. "My poor brother was an old man, but Mr. Lampson was so young, and such a lovely person!"

Thus it was that she was absent when all the other official agencies' representatives arrived. First, of course, came the fire brigade, which could do nothing except protect the houses next door while the inferno in the Cronin house burned itself out. Then came the police homicide team, just in case, and then the head of the fire department's arson squad.

And a moment later, an inconspicuous car about three years old arrived, and out of it got a tall, big-boned, homely, middle-aged man with a rather large mole beside his nose. Both the homicide men and the arson man looked at him in surprise.

"Nothing here for you, Les, I'm afraid," said the arson man. "Gas leak and accidental explosion. Quite a few of the neighbors noticed the gas leak. Real estate salesman by the name of Jesse Dexter went in to fix it, and this fellow Lampson went in to hold a flashlight. All kinds of witnesses."

"There usually are," said Mr. Lester A. Honeycutt.

"Lot of gas escaped, that's for sure. The lawn was full of gopher tunnels, and look—they blew up like land mines," said one of the homicide men. Just then the battalion chief passed, on his way back to his car to radio in a call for another pumper. "Chief, like to present Les Honeycutt, and investigator for a company that services life insurance underwriters. He—"

"Nice to know you. Haven't time now," said the battalion chief. "Damn attic must have been full of gas. Window and door open, so there was some fresh air getting into the house, but that only created a draft for the fire. Of course,

under the house it was loaded with gas!"

The chief trotted away, the arson man at his heels. It was at this moment that Miss Unity Dexter came running down the street on her high heels. Her tear-stained face was somehow prettier than ever.

"I left Mrs. Lampson in the doctor's office. It's certain then—they were inside? Oh hello, Mr. Honeycutt," she cried distractedly. "This was the house I told you about, but it's too late now. Really, it does seem to have been a hoodoo house!"

"Yes indeedy," said Mr. Honeycutt. "Where is your car parked, Miss Dexter?"

"Back there," Miss Unity said vaguely. "They wouldn't let me within a block of it—the police, I mean. And it's my own brother, the only soul I had left in the world, in there."

She pointed to what was left of the Cronin house—a low bed of roaring coals, which the firemen had surrounded with a wall of hissing water. Miss Unity unfolded a scented handkerchief and began blowing her nose, shaking her head and sobbing.

"Yes indeedy," said Mr. Honeycutt, with a glance at the homicide man. "I wonder if I could have the keys to your car?"

Miss Unity stopped blowing her nose. "The keys to my car? What do you want with them?"

"This officer and I would like them, please."

"You've got a car of your own, haven't you?" Miss Unity said indignantly. "I need mine myself."

The homicide man looked puzzled but willing. Mr. Honeycutt said to him wearily, "There was too much gas here for an ordinary leak. Somebody did some tampering, someone who knew what he—or she—was doing, and who had access to tools. Even so, gas from a big leak would have dissipated through the neighborhood faster than this apparently did. Everybody smelled gas, but not enough to worry them into complaining. Yet this place went up like a bomb."

"Kind of puzzling, yes," the homicide man said.

"But what do you want with my car?" said Miss Unity.

"You live in a trailer," said Mr. Honeycutt. "You burn propane gas. You have two tanks mounted on the hitch, so when one runs out, you can turn the other one on, and disconnect the empty one to take it to be refilled. M'am, this gas did not spread *from* the house *to* the gopher tunnels. It was the other way round. The gopher tunnels ignited first, blowing up the house.

"I think what happened is this: Sometimes in the last day or so, you brought a ten-gallon tank of propane here, with a flexible pipe outlet, and hid it somewhere around the house with the outlet

poked down a gopher hole. I think that this evening, you came here and turned it on while your brother wasn't looking. I think while you and your brother were in the house, that tank was exhausting a two months' supply of propane gas into those gopher holes and all through the porous, sandy earth under the house.

"I think that after your brother and Mr. Lampson went into the house, and you went to the nursery to buy gopher poison, you first shut off the gas from the propane cylinder and put the cylinder in your car. I think you then left some sort of ignition device, set for ten minutes, at a gopher hole near the curb. When you came rushing back here, you picked up the ignition device and put it in your car. It probably isn't there now, but I'll bet a good search squad can find it somewhere between here and the doctor's office where you left Mrs. Lampson."

"I suppose you know what you're saying. You're practically accusing me of *murder*," Miss Unity exclaimed. "I do happen to have an empty propane tank in my car, but there is nothing unusual about this. I always take my own empties to the plant to be refilled."

"Yes indeedy," said Mr. Honeycutt, "but I just wonder what they're going to say at the gas plant about *when you last had a cylinder refilled*. If it was in the last day or two, you might have to explain what became of that supply of gas. Your car keys, please."

"I will not stand around here to be insulted," Miss Unity said indignantly.

She hurried away. Mr. Honeycutt said to the homicide man, "Better have somebody stop her. She and her brother had big policies—a hundred grand each—and were mutual beneficiaries. We've been keeping an eye on this situation for a couple of years, but we didn't have a thing to go on until this week, when she paid the premium on her brother's policy but *not* the one on hers. She tried to save a few bucks and blew the whole plot."

The homicide man waved, and one of the patrol officers who had first arrived at the scene stopped Miss Unity.

"Handcuff her if you have to," the homicide man said. He looked around at the gutted lawn, shaking his head. "You know, Les, if you kept it under control, here's a hell of a way to get rid of gophers!"

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring U.N.C.L.E. NOVELS every month

HOUSEBOAT

Two deadly stowaways had

them captive, and

there was no way out—

except the deadly river!

by RICHARD DEMING

MIKE FARADAY sensed something wrong about the two men shortly after they came aboard the houseboat. They were too well dressed for vacationing fishermen, a little too suave and their English too precise. They simply didn't behave as New England businessmen. They impressed him as Europeans who had learned English somewhere, such as Harvard or Yale.

Mike Faraday didn't look like a professor of theoretical mathematics. He was only thirty-two years old, wore a crew cut which made him look about twenty-five, and had the build of an Olympic swimmer. He had spent most of his life on the Mississippi, and was at home in the water as he was on land.

His wife Ellen, five years younger, had a swimmer's body too, though hers was less muscular and more softly curved. She too had grown up on the river and knew it as well as he did.

They met the two strangers on the river bank near Vicksburg, where they had anchored the houseboat overnight in a small

cove. The men were standing on the bank, casting with bass plugs, when Faraday came on deck shortly after sunup.

He wondered what in the devil they expected to catch in the Mississippi with plugs, especially so close to shore. There wouldn't be anything but mudcat here, and they didn't hit plugs.

Both men were dressed in well-pressed slacks, shined shoes, light cotton jackets over white sport shirts and Panama hats. Their fiberglass rods looked brand new and there were identical, shiny new tackle boxes at the feet of each.

Faraday threw them a friendly greeting and both men raised their hands in polite acknowledgment.

Afttr breakfast Faraday planned to replenish their drinking water supply at a yacht club they had spotted the evening before about a hundred yards back up the river. He pushed the board they used as a gangplank over the river bank, which was only about six feet away. The two men reeled in their plugs, picked up their tackle boxes and came over nearer to examine the houseboat.

The taller of the two, a lean six-footer of about forty with a thin, sharp-nosed face, said, "That is an interesting boat. Where are you going?"

"New Orleans," Faraday said. "We started from St. Louis."

The other man, a bulky, wide-shouldered fellow of about thirty-five with a square, expressionless face, looked at the outboard motor on the stern. "That engine hardly looks powerful enough to push a boat that size."

"Oh, we only use it for steering," Faraday said. "We just drift with the current until we're ready to anchor at night. The current's only four miles an hour, so we only make about fifty miles a day, but we're in no hurry. It's just a leisurely fishing trip."

"How are you going to get it back upstream?" the thin-faced man asked.

"That's not our problem," Faraday said with a grin. "It's rented. The outfit that owns it will have it towed back to St. Louis at the end of the voyage."

The two men looked at each other. The taller said, "Now there is what we should have done, Martin. Would not something like this make a wonderful vacation?"

The bulky man nodded. "What is the name of the company which rents these boats?"

"Callaway Houseboat Rentals in St. Louis. You can rent them for as short or long a trip as you wish. They charge fifty cents a mile, which works out to four hundred dollars in our case. That isn't bad when you consider that it costs that much to rent a beach cottage for a couple of weeks."

Both men looked the boat over with growing interest. Finally the

taller said, "Mind if we come aboard to see it?"

"Sure, come ahead," Faraday said cordially.

The two men mounted the narrow gangplank and stepped on deck. Ellen stuck her golden blonde head from the galley at that moment.

"Breakfast," she called, then saw the strangers. "Oh, we have visitors."

She came the rest of the way out on deck, with typical femininity looking a little self-conscious about her worn denim jeans, white cotton sweatshirt and bare feet. She needn't have been self-conscious, Faraday thought with pride. Even in fishing clothes she was beautiful.

He said to the visitors, "My name is Mike Faraday and this is my wife Ellen."

Both men set down their fishing gear, removed their hats and offered Ellen formal bows, which gave Faraday the first inkling that there was something strange about them. He had already noted their precise, unaccented voices, but had merely assumed they were probably graduates of some Ivy League school. Now it struck him that Americans don't normally bow to women when introduced.

He wondered why a pair of obviously cultured Europeans would be fishing with the wrong gear from a muddy bank of the Mississippi.

Both men offered their hands to Faraday. The taller man said his name was Albert Johnson, the bulky man introduced himself as Martin Smith.

"Your name is Michael Faraday?" Smith said. "The same as the famous English scientist?"

"I was named after him," Faraday said. "I'm supposed to be descended from him."

Ellen said with wifely pride, "Mike is a greater scientist than his ancestor. He's a professor of theoretical math at Washington University in St. Louis, and is internationally known for his work in the field."

The thin-nosed Albert Johnson said, "I have read of you in the science sections of various news magazines. Have you not just developed a revolutionary new rocket fuel?"

"Not quite," Faraday said. "Merely a new mathematical theorem which may lead to the development of a new type of fuel, among other things. I'm a theoretical scientist. I work with computers instead of test tubes."

"We have something in common," Johnson said with a smile. "Mr. Smith and I are partners in an electronics firm in Massachusetts."

"Oh?" Faraday said, wondering if perhaps their accents were merely New England after all. "I'm afraid practical science is beyond me. Aside from computers, about the only scientific equipment I use is a pencil."

"He's just being modest," Ellen said with a grin. "What he means is that he's beyond the practical scientists. Only a half dozen men in his own field understand him. Have you gentlemen had breakfast?"

The bulky Martin Smith said, "We ate before dawn, but I would appreciate a cup of coffee."

"I could use one too," the tall man agreed.

The visitors had coffee with them in the galley while Faraday and Ellen breakfasted on bacon and eggs. Afterward Faraday showed them around the houseboat.

The men seemed impressed by the comfortable amount of room and the modern facilities. In addition to the galley, which was really a full-sized kitchen and doubled as a dining room and general lounge, there was a bathroom with a shower, two bunk rooms with four bunks each and a storage room. The kitchen was equipped with a butane stove and a butane refrigerator. There were Coleman gasoline lanterns to furnish light.

"There's a pump with a filter which removes most of the mud from river water for the storage tank on the roof," Faraday explained. "We can't drink it, of course, but it's adequate for washing. We carry bottled water for drinking. I plan to replenish our supply here; then we won't have to stop for any sort of supplies until we reach New Orleans. Except for drinking water the boat is pretty self-sufficient."

When they returned to the galley, where Ellen was washing the breakfast dishes, Albert Johnson said reflectively, "At fifty miles a day, it would be about sixteen days from St. Louis to New Orleans. Since you're five hundred miles on your way, I assume you've been sailing about ten days."

"That's right," Faraday said. "We left July tenth."

"Then you should arrive in New Orleans in six more days?"

"Uh-huh."

"Mr. Smith and I have only a week of our vacation left, so we hardly have time to go clear up to St. Louis and rent a houseboat," Johnson said. "You have more than enough bunk space here, Mr. Faraday. Would you be interested in a couple of paying guests for the rest of the voyage?"

Faraday was framing a polite refusal when Ellen, who was something of a penny-pincher, said quickly, "How paying?"

The thin-nosed man threw her a pleasant smile. "We would be willing to assume the full cost of the boat rental if you threw in our food."

"You mean all four hundred dollars?" Ellen asked, wide-eyed.

Albert Johnson shrugged. "We can write it off as a business expense. As I say, we don't have time to run up to St. Louis and arrange

our own voyage. It would be worth it to us. We have been fishing from the bank for a week without catching anything."

A warning bell sounded in Faraday's mind. Neither looked as though he had been fishing from a river bank for a full week. Besides, it was peculiar that fishermen would travel all the way from Massachusetts to fish the Mississippi River. New England was too full of better fishing spots. It just didn't make sense.

If they could afford four hundred dollars for passage on the houseboat, why hadn't they rented a boat for fishing? Remembering the buss plugs they had been using, he suddenly decided they were complete frauds.

"This is a sort of second honeymoon for us," he said. "Your offer is very generous, but we prefer to be alone."

"But, honey," Ellen protested. "Four hundred dollars!"

"I have a reasonably good income," Faraday said a trifle testily. "Let's not change plans in midstream, Ellen."

"We are not yet in midstream," Johnson said with an indulgent chuckle. "We are still tied up to the bank. Mrs. Faraday obviously would like at least to discuss it. It would take us only a few minutes to run back to the hotel and get our luggage. We have a car parked at the top of the bank."

"There's nothing to discuss," Faraday said firmly. "I'm not interested in your offer."

Ellen could tell by his tone that there was no use arguing. With an apologetic smile at the two would-be passengers, she began putting dishes away.

The wide-shouldered Martin Smith went over to the galley window facing the bank and looked out.

"Picnic party gathering on the beach," he said tonelessly.

Albert Johnson went over to look too. Then he turned with a smile.

"I guess we will run along, Mr. and Mrs. Faraday. Thank you for the coffee and the tour of the boat. If you change your minds about taking on a couple of paying passengers, we are staying at the Vicksburg Inn."

"We won't," Faraday assured him. "It was nice talking to you both."

"The same to you," the thin-nosed man said. "Come along, Martin."

The two men moved out into the passageway between the galley and the bunk rooms, and then out on deck. Faraday and Ellen followed.

A group of about a dozen teenagers in swim suits had gathered on a small stretch of sand at the river's edge only a few yards downstream and were laying out blankets and picnic baskets.

The visitors picked up their fish-

ing gear, nodded final good-bys and made their ways down the gangplank. Apparently they were through fishing, because they climbed a steep path up the bank and disappeared over its top.

Ellen said, "Why were you so set against our having a free vacation? We're not that rich."

Faraday was still gazing at the top of the bank. In a slow voice he said, "I have a peculiar feeling that if those kids over there hadn't appeared, it wouldn't have been so easy to turn them down."

Ellen gave him a quick glance. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe I'm over imaginative, but I got the impression the big-shouldered man looked out the window to see if any witnesses were around. I know this sounds melodramatic, but if that picnic group hadn't been there, I suspect they were planning to take over the boat."

Ellen's eyes grew enormous. "You're kidding! Why would they do a thing like that? You think they're criminals running from the law?"

"Criminals on the lam wouldn't pick a conveyance that only travels four miles an hour," Faraday said drily. "I don't think they were just looking for any old boat. I think they came down here with their brand new fishing togs this morning as a deliberate excuse to meet us and get aboard this particular boat."

"But that's ridiculous," she said. "How would they know we'd be here? We didn't know ourselves we were going to anchor here until we pulled in last night."

"Our trip was no secret, Ellen. Anyone who wanted to take the trouble could easily have found out about it. And at fifty miles a day, they could just as easily keep track of our progress from shore."

"But why?" Ellen asked. "What on earth would be the percentage of going to all that trouble to hijack an old tub like this? They couldn't get away with it anyway. It won't go anywhere but downstream."

"Did you get the impression they might be foreigners?" he asked.

"Foreigners? Of course not. They're from Massachusetts."

"I could say I was from the moon, but that wouldn't make it so. Just for the sake of argument, let's assume they're a couple of foreign agents. Begin to make sense?"

She stared at him. "Your formula," she breathed.

"Theorem, not formula," he said patiently. "I don't know what good it would do a spy, even if he got me to explain it, because they can read the theorem in any scientific journal in about a month. If they're looking for the formula for the new rocket fuel the news magazines have been playing up, they're chasing the wrong guy. I couldn't tell anybody how to build a rocket fuel."

"There's no reason spies would

know that, after all your publicity as the man who will send us beyond the stars. I think we should get in touch with the FBI."

"My work isn't top secret," Faraday said reasonably. "Or at least it shouldn't be, and probably won't be when Max Abbott and Earl Laing get through pounding some sense into those pinheads in Washington. Besides, what would we tell the FBI? That a couple of men claiming to be electronic engineers from Massachusetts offered to buy passage on our boat?"

"It was you who suggested they were spies."

"I've been reading too much Ian Fleming," Faraday said. "But I still think there was something shady about them. I think we'll get out of here and pick up water farther downstream."

He went over to the gangplank, drew it aboard and started the motor. As soon as it turned over, he pulled in the anchor, engaged the prop and steered the boat out into the channel. Then he cut the motor and let the houseboat drift.

Ten miles downstream they spotted a boat livery. Faraday restarted the motor and pulled over to the dock to take on drinking water. They didn't discuss their strange visitors any more all day, but when it began to grow dark and Faraday showed no sign of looking for a mooring, Ellen didn't ask any questions. He knew by her silence that the two men were still as much on her mind as on his.

"I thought we'd go on a few miles after dark," he said laconically. "I'll set out the running lights."

He lit four Coleman lanterns and set them fore and aft, to port and starboard, then started the outboard motor.

"We may as well make a little

time," he said. "I don't want to run in the dark too long."

The outboard motor was twenty-five horsepower, which would have pushed the twelve-to-fifteen-foot boat it was designed for along at a clip of from thirty to thirty-five miles an hour. But was barely enough to give the heavy houseboat headway. Against the current the boat would have stood still. With the current helping, it moved along at about eight miles an hour.

About two hours after dusk the lights of Natchez appeared ahead.

"We've made nearly seventy miles," Faraday said. "Guess we'll call it a day."

Every night up until now he had moored on the west side of the river, because the main channel tended to hug that bank. Tonight he steered over to the Louisiana side, well out of the channel.

Without comment Ellen went to the bow and began taking soundings with a leaded line as they neared the far bank. As the flat-bottomed boat drew only three feet, there wasn't much danger of running aground, and there wouldn't be a serious problem even if they did, but Faraday liked to know what kind of water he was getting into.

They edged over a sandbar which showed a depth of only four feet before the water began to deepen again and they found themselves in a small, currentless cove. The Coleman lanterns threw enough light for Faraday to see the river bank. It was low and marshy and there was no sign of habitation along it. A dozen feet away from the bank he cut the motor and threw out the anchor.

Ellen came back from the bow, glanced toward the Mississippi shore and said casually, "Think they can see our lights from over there?"

"There won't be any to see, except through our windows, in a couple of minutes," he said. "From that distance nobody will be able to tell if the windows are in a houseboat, or just in a cottage near the bank."

He shut the valves of all the Coleman lanterns except one, and carried that into the galley. They had a cup of coffee, then he carried the lantern into the bunk room they were using so that they could see to undress for bed.

"You think maybe we should have contacted the FBI just in case?" Ellen asked as he kissed her goodnight.

"They probably weren't foreign agents," he said. "They couldn't find us here anyway. They'd be looking fifteen to twenty miles back on the other side of the river. Stop worrying and go to sleep."

THE NEXT morning he wished he had called the FBI.

Ellen was still dressing when he entered the galley. He came to an abrupt halt in the doorway when

he saw the two men seated side-by-side on the opposite side of the table, facing the door. They were dressed the same as the day before, except that their hats lay on top of the refrigerator. Two small overnight bags stood on the floor in one corner.

"How the devil did you get here?" Faraday demanded.

"We borrowed a rowboat," the thin-nosed man said. "Since we lacked the owner's permission, we thought it would be unwise to keep it. We set it adrift."

The bulky man said, "Your lights made it just as easy to keep track of your boat as in the daytime. We appreciate your lighting them."

Faraday heard a gasp of surprise and turned to find Ellen behind him. He moved on into the galley.

"Since you have no boat, I guess you'll have to swim," he said ominously. "Want to dive in yourselves, or be tossed overboard?"

The tall man raised his hand from his lap. There was a thirty-eight revolver in it. Ellen emitted another little gasp.

"Sit down, both of you," the man with the gun suggested.

After staring at the gun for a moment, Faraday quietly pulled out a chair for Ellen. When she sank into it, he sat next to her, so that they faced the two men on the other side of the table.

"We don't want any trouble," the tall man said. "If you cooperate, we will let you enjoy the rest of the voyage. If you insist on being difficult, we will have to tie Mrs. Faraday to her bunk."

"Why just my wife?" Faraday growled. "Why not me too?"

"We're not very familiar with boats of this type, Mr. Faraday. We might run it aground. We need you to navigate. You will bear it in mind that unpleasant things may happen to your wife if your navigation isn't efficient."

After digesting this, Faraday said, "What do you want?"

"Your formula, Mr. Faraday."

Ellen whispered, "They are spies, Mike. We should have called the FBI when we stopped for water."

The bulky man turned his expressionless face to her. "So you actually suspected us," he said with mild surprise. "I thought our pose was excellent. Thank you for the information that you did not phone anyone when you made your stop."

Ellen looked abashed.

Faraday said, "You men are on the wrong track. I have no formula. All I developed was a mathematical theorem, and it can no more be suppressed from the world than Einstein's theory of relativity could have been.

"At this moment my two immediate assistants at the university, Professors Max Abbott and Earl Laing, are in Washington explaining the facts of life to a group of

thick-headed bureaucrats. I'm quite certain they'll succeed in convincing them that a mathematical theorem cannot be classified top secret. By the time we get back to St. Louis, I expect to have permission to publish my computations in detail. If you'll wait about a month, you can read it in any scientific journal."

The thin-nosed man gave him a smile of polite disbelief.

"You're as thick-headed as those jerks in Washington," Faraday said dourly. "Can't you get it through your head that I know absolutely nothing of military value?"

"Our superiors believe you do, Mr. Faraday. It is not our function to decide the value of what you can tell them. We were merely instructed to deliver you."

"Deliver me where?"

"To a submarine we will rendezvous with some miles out in the gulf."

Faraday looked at him with his mouth open.

"You mean you plan to take this ark out into the gulf?"

"I think your little outboard motor will push it far enough for our purpose. It will not be required to push it back again."

Ellen said in a high voice, "Where will the submarine take us?"

The bulky man said, "You will learn that when you arrive at your destination, Mrs. Faraday. Now, if you please, will you begin to prepare breakfast while your husband gets the boat underway?"

Rising to his feet, he drew a blue-steel automatic from beneath his arm. "All right, Faraday. Start the motor and pull up anchor. I think I had better warn you that your wife will remain here in the galley with my partner all day, while you and I will stay on deck. At the slightest sign that you are not fully cooperating with us, my partner will put a bullet through her pretty head. For example, if any boats hail us and you try to give an alarm, your wife will immediately die. Understand?"

"I understand," Faraday growled.

The man lifted his hat from the top of the refrigerator and dropped it over his gun, completely concealing the gun. Even from close by the occupants of any passing boats would think he was merely carrying the hat in his hand, Faraday realized.

He preceded the pseudo Martin Smith out on deck, started the engine and pulled in the anchor.

Faraday had no opportunity to confer with Ellen privately all that day, but he had a lot of opportunity to think. He made and discarded a dozen plans before he finally hit on one he decided just might possibly work. It would require Ellen's cooperation, though, and he could see no way to get instructions to her.

At noon the thin-nosed man had Ellen bring sandwiches out to the

men on deck, following behind her with his hat also draped over his gun. Faraday decided to test to see if either of their captors had any nautical knowledge at all.

"If either of you are interested in fishing, you might pick up some jack salmon along here by trolling from the rear of the boat," he said. "I believe the channel in this part of the river is charted at six fathoms."

Ellen gave him a peculiar look. The river current shifted the silt on the bottom so often that accurate depth charts were impossible, and they had no charts anyway.

The man who called himself Albert Johnson asked without much interest, "How deep is that in feet?"

"Forty-eight. A fathom is eight feet."

He held his breath for some reaction, but neither man commented, indicating that neither knew a fathom was actually six feet. He was conscious of Ellen's gaze on him and knew she realized he had some plan. He was sure she would be wise enough to go along when the proper time came.

Neither of their captors showed any desire to fish. When the sandwich plates were empty, the thin-nosed man ordered Ellen back to the galley and followed after her.

Several times during the day the houseboat was hailed by other boats. Each time the bulky man called a cheery reply. Faraday, afraid that any sound at all from him might endanger Ellen, merely waved to the hailers.

About an hour before dusk Faraday spotted the sort of place he was looking for. By now they had left Mississippi and the banks both sides of the river were in Louisiana. Up ahead, close to the east bank, was a low, reed-covered island. The reeds grew about waist high and, as there were no trees on the island, even from a distance it could be seen that it was uninhabited.

It seemed to be about a mile long and no more than fifty yards wide. The channel between it and the east bank was only about seventy-five feet wide. The river bank was also covered with waist-high reeds

and there were no cottages along the bank.

The place was ideal for what Faraday had in mind. He was sure that, so far from the main channel, there would be no current the other side of the island. And the area was isolated enough to satisfy their captors as a safe place to moor overnight.

"It'll be dark in another hour," he said to the bulky man. "We need calm water to moor overnight, and I doubt that we'll find another place as suitable as the channel behind that island ahead. Want to pull in there?"

The man who called himself Martin Smith scanned the island and the shoreline beyond it, and was obviously pleased to see no buildings of any sort.

"You are the navigator," he said. "Are you sure the water is deep enough there?"

"We only draw three feet. I'll need my wife to give me soundings."

"Soundings?"

Faraday was surprised at the man's abysmal ignorance of everything about river navigation.

"She has to stand at the bow and test the water depth with a leaded line," he explained. "There may be sandbars near the island which would run us aground. Then we'd be in real trouble."

The bulky man glanced around to make sure no other boats were in sight.

"Albert!" he called. "Bring Mrs. Faraday out."

Ellen came out on deck, followed by the fake Albert Johnson, again holding his hat over his gun.

"We're pulling into that channel up ahead," Faraday said to his wife, pointing. "Give me soundings in fathoms."

Ellen gave him a quick glance. They didn't ordinarily bother with nautical terms, Ellen always calling out soundings in feet. She made no comment, however.

Faraday went aft to start the motor, trailed by the bulky man, while Ellen went forward accompanied by the other man.

Ellen made her first sounding a hundred feet from the entrance to the channel. "Mark three," she called.

As they slipped into the channel entrance, Faraday could tell by the feel of the boat that there was no current here.

"Mark twain," Ellen called.

"What's that mean?" the bulky man asked.

"Sixteen feet," Faraday said. "Two fathoms. We're safe even at a half a fathom."

He maneuvered the boat in to within about twenty feet of the island.

"Mark one," Ellen called.

They were now a good hundred feet down the channel. The water between the island and the riverbank still stretched a good seventy-five feet across, but Faraday let

the boat drift to within twelve feet of the island.

Ellen called, "One half fathom."

"That's our limit of tolerance," Faraday said. "I'd better pull out a little."

But as he turned the motor, there was a dull, grinding noise and the houseboat came to a dead stop.

"Nuts," Faraday said, cutting the motor. "We've run aground."

He went forward, trailed by the bulky man. The thin-nosed man looked at him ominously.

"Was that on purpose?" he asked his partner.

"I don't think so," the bulky man said. "The boat only draws three feet, and we were in four feet of water. He was trying to move the boat farther out when we grounded."

Taking the leaded line from Ellen, Faraday cast it out in several directions.

"No problem," he announced cheerily. "We're just on a narrow sandbar. It'll save us throwing out the anchor, and we'll easily be able to push it off tomorrow."

"You had better be able to," the tall man said coldly. "If you fail, we will proceed by other means and leave your wife here."

His tone suggested that Ellen would be left behind dead. Faraday began to wonder if his idea had been so brilliant after all.

The bulky man said, "Well, let's have dinner and sleep on it."

To prevent any attempt at escape during the night, their captors hogtied Faraday and Ellen to their bunks.

They did such an excellent job that both quickly abandoned any idea of struggling loose.

In the darkness Ellen whispered, "I know you grounded us on purpose, but what did it accomplish? We won't have any trouble getting afloat."

"We may if we can delay things until the sun is well up," Faraday said. "Take as much time as you can preparing breakfast."

"All right," she agreed. "But what do you have in mind?"

"What kind of fish do you find in the Mississippi in an isolated spot such as this where there is no current?" he asked.

After a moment of silence, she said, "Mostly gar, I suppose. Why?"

"And what happens when the sun hits the water?"

"The ugly things rise to sun themselves."

"Uh-huh. These characters know nothing about the Mississippi. I'll bet they never even heard of an alligator gar. Here's what I have in mind."

He explained his plan in detail.

In the morning their captors untied them at dawn. They took their time washing and dressing, and afterward Ellen took so long cooking breakfast that the two men began to get impatient. By the time

they had all eaten and they got out on deck, the sun was well up.

The still, muddy water of the channel between the island and the shore was dotted with the long, narrow snouts of alligator gar, some of the heads as long as two feet.

"What are those things?" their two kidnapers asked simultaneously.

At the sound of the voices, the nearby heads popped out of sight beneath the surface. The gars farther away placidly continued to enjoy the sun, however.

With their sharp-toothed jaws they were ferocious looking monsters. Nothing but their heads showed in the muddy water, and since their heads constituted a full third of their total length, it was easy for anyone who had never seen a gar to imagine an enormous body extending beneath the surface behind the head.

Actually they seldom grew to an overall length of more than six feet, head and all, and possessed narrow, eel-like bodies no bigger around than a man's wrist. They were totally inedible, but completely harmless to man.

"They're alligators," Faraday said. "This creates a problem. Somebody has to get into the water to get us off this sandbar. Any volunteers?"

The kidnapers were staring at the numerous heads still on the surface some distance away. It was obvious that neither questioned Faraday's identification of them as alligators, which wasn't surprising, since the alligator gar gets its name from the close resemblance of its head to that of an alligator.

"The place is alive with them," the bulky man said with a shudder. "What are we going to do?"

The tall man looked at Faraday. "What was your planned procedure to get us off this bar?"

"I planned to get out alongside the boat, between the boat and the island, and pry us free with that four-by-four," Faraday said, pointing to where the twelve-foot beam lay on deck. "But I've changed my mind."

The tall man gave Ellen a contemplative look.

"She isn't strong enough to handle the beam," Faraday said quickly. "Besides, she can't swim."

"How likely are those things to attack a person?" the tall man asked.

Faraday shrugged. "Depends on how hungry they are. I doubt that you'd have a chance swimming the channel to the mainland, but right alongside the boat you might get the boat pried free before one of the brutes grabbed your leg. Want to risk it?"

The tall man looked at his partner.

"Absolutely not," the bulky man said definitely. "You are as expendable as I am."

The tall man mused for a moment, then came to a decision. "I

guess you are elected, Mr. Faraday."

"We cannot risk him," his partner objected. "Suppose they gobble him up?"

"It's a risk we have to take," the tall man said. "The alternative is to stay here surrounded by these monsters until we either starve to death or are rescued by someone. Do you have any better suggestions?"

The bulky man looked at Ellen, then at the twelve-foot four-by-four and dismissed her as a possibility. "I suppose we'll have to risk it," he said reluctantly.

The tall man turned to Faraday. In a cold voice he said, "We will give you fifteen minutes to get us afloat. If we are not off the bar by then, we will toss your wife to these monsters."

Faraday glanced at Ellen. She was pale, but he knew she wasn't frightened by the thought of the gars, for she was as familiar with them as he was.

He said with an air of resignation, "All right. I'll have to change to swim trunks. Will you both stand by the rail with your guns to drive off any alligators who try to attack me?"

"We want you alive," the tall man assured him. "We will cover you."

The bulky man accompanied him to the bunk room while he changed into trunks. When they came back out on deck, Faraday lifted one end of the four-by-four and heaved it onto the rail. He pushed it over to let it slide into the currentless water, where it floated next to the boat. There was about twelve feet of water between the boat and the island.

Faraday took a deep breath, said, "Keep your guns ready," and lowered himself over the side.

His feet sank a foot into silt and the water came to just above his waist. The two men on deck stood shoulder-to-shoulder, their eyes peering at the opaque water and their guns leveled at it.

The heavy beam was easy to handle in the water. Directing one end of it against the side of the boat, Faraday pushed on the other end. The prying end slid along the curve of the boat's bottom until it was lodged in the mud beneath it. Faraday heaved upward on the other end and felt the boat shift outward slightly. He pushed the prying end of the beam back beneath it and heaved again.

This time the boat floated free.

Letting the sunken end of the beam rise to the surface, Faraday pushed it toward the rail. The bulky man bent down, lifted the end onto the rail and pulled the beam aboard.

"Now pull me aboard before one of those things gets me," Faraday said, wading toward the boat.

Then he screamed, "My leg!" And began to thresh in the water.

He caught a quick glimpse of all

three faces above him just before he let himself sink beneath the surface. The tall man was horrified. The bulky man for once had lost his expressionlessness and was looking startled. Ellen, who knew there was nothing in the water to attack him, merely looked wary.

Faraday gave a powerful thrust with his legs and shot underwater beneath the curved bow of the boat. He surfaced on the other side and pulled himself aboard all in the same motion. He stood dripping muddy water and getting his breath back, blocked from the view of those on the other side of the boat by the cabin.

He slipped into the door of the passageway between the galley and the bunk rooms and came out the other side. Not more than fifteen seconds had elapsed since he submerged, and all three people were still staring down into the water, the two men in stunned shock, Ellen because she was following instructions.

His bare feet making no sound on the deck, Faraday glided forward. One arm went about the tall man's shoulders, the other about the bulky man's, and he hurtled overboard, carrying both with him.

As they went beneath the surface, his legs scissored about the bulky man from behind and his hands probed for the other's right hand. Finding it empty, he pushed the man away, wrapped his left arm about the man's neck and groped for his gun with his right.

The man still gripped it, but in his terror at being in what he thought was alligator infested water, he offered no resistance when it was jerked from his grip. It slipped from Faraday's hand and sank.

Faraday released his scissors grip, put a foot into the middle of the man's back and pushed. Surfacing, he took three powerful strokes and pulled himself aboard the houseboat.

By now the boat had drifted out about twenty feet into the channel. The two men, in water to their waists, were floundering in panic for the island. They clambered ashore and stood with clothes dripping, staring at the boat.

"We'll send the FBI to rescue you," Faraday called. "Unless you don't want to wait. You can probably get halfway to shore before the alligators get you."

He went aft to start the engine. As they chugged along the channel southward, the two men were still standing gazing after them.

If they remained quiet long enough, Faraday knew, the channel would again soon be dotted with the narrow, snaggle-toothed heads of gars sunning themselves.

He doubted that the men would be gone when the FBI arrived.

"... Who Married Dear Old Dad."

His ma was too sweet, his dad was too mean.

Someday one of them had to crack wide open . . .

by ED LACY

ON THE FIRST Saturday of the month I find myself thinking about this theory among psychiatrists that most men are seeking their mother in their wives. Maybe I'm not saying it exactly right—I've only been reading up on this stuff lately and it's hard going—but you get the idea: we marry a gal who has the same mental or physical characteristics as mama had.

I know it's worked out that way in my case. My Hazel is not only about Mom's height, but has the same kind of cute, warm face. Hazel also has Mom's kindness and easy-going nature.

My Mom would bend over backwards to help somebody. She's always thinking of the next person and never had a selfish thought in her life. Mom could get along with

anybody. Considering Pop's temper, it's amazing they had eighteen peaceful years. Or at least I can remember that many. I don't mean Pop raised hell every night or every week, but when he did, he was a brute.

Up to the time I was about thirteen I used to believe Mom when she'd explain away a black eye or some bruise on her pretty face with a giggle about, "I'm getting clumsy in my old age—fell against the kitchen table while cooking yesterday."

When I was sixteen I saw Pop hit her and I took a knife from the tool chest and went after him. Dad took one look at my eyes and ran. I think he knew by then I'd inherited his violent temper, his mean streak.

This has always amazed me. I liked my Dad. Most times he was a swell guy, but running a small general store is a petty business, in many ways, and it can drive a guy kind of nuts at times. What puzzles me is that while I liked Pop, I worshiped Mom from the day I opened my eyes, so you'd think I would inherit her good nature.

I'm aware of this temper I'm cursed with. Here's Hazel, practically kissing the ground I walk on and don't think for a second I don't appreciate her. In the three years we've been married I've never once been sorry I asked her to be my wife.

But sometimes I lose my head over such minor matters. Of course I've also inherited Dad's general store. Now it's a small but booming supermarket, but there's still these petty details which can get a man worked up. Take the other day: I was expecting a shipment of assorted spools of thread—the whole order wasn't over $20—but when the package arrived they'd sent only white thread. That meant writing the company a letter, sending the package back, so when I came home for supper I was in a bad mood.

When Hazel said, "Hurry up; tonight's our bowling night," I snapped, "I'm not going!"

Well, Hazel didn't get angry—she didn't even ask why I didn't want to bowl. After supper she started to watch TV and when I asked why she was sitting around the house she said, "I'll forget bowling tonight."

Of course I realized I was taking out the petty side of the store on Hazel and I said, "Okay, we'll go bowling."

"No, we'll go next week."

"Damn it, we're going tonight! We're in the league; they'll be expecting us. Come on, get dressed."

"Honey, if you don't feel up to—"

"We're going bowling!" I shouted.

From the wide-eyed way Hazel was looking at me I knew my face was flushed. I realized I was ready to hit her if she didn't move. So I

calmed down fast, forced myself to. I added gently, "Darling, I was out of sorts because I was hungry, I guess. Please, Hazel, I want to bowl. Really."

As it turned out I had one of my best nights, scoring 196 in one game. And when we went to bed that night I was proud of the way I'd held my temper in. I remembered Mom tackling me when I started after Pop with the knife, telling me, "Temper is a sickness. He can't help it." Which is why I've been doing all this reading—every sickness has a cure.

The fact I was ready to put a hand on Hazel frightened the devil out of me. Of course, what really bugs me is the way Hazel reacts when I do flip. Exactly like Mom used to—merely takes it. That worries me. I wish Hazel would let off a little steam, at least shout back at me.

But I love Hazel and I think we'll make it okay. After all, Mom took it for eighteen years and Hazel and I have only been married going on three years, so we have time to adjust.

From my reading I know that every one of us has their boiling point. Once you're aware of that, you're on top of the situation. So I've been cooling my temper, think I've mastered it instead of the other way around.

Believe me, the first Saturday of the month serves as a brake on my violent moods. I think hard all that day as I drive up to visit Mama in the State pen, where she's cheerfully serving life for finally shooting Pop's hard head off when he took his fists to her just once too often.

And the close resemblance between my darling Hazel and my sweet Mama is a cooling thought which lasts all month.

At least, so far . . .

Always there with your help

SUPPORT YOUR RED CROSS
BLOOD PROGRAM

FOR FASTER SERVICE—USE ZIP CODE NUMBERS! REMEMBER, ZIP NUMBERS ARE PART OF YOUR ADDRESS! AVOID LAST MINUTE RUSH. MAIL EARLY IN THE DAY! IT'S FASTER.

IT'S MURDER OUT THERE

by BRYCE WALTON

He'd killed hundreds of bad guys on TV, and there was nothing he did not know about the gentle art of murder. Nothing—except what to do when the real thing came along.

PHIL NORMAN sat staring out at his Beverly Hills swimming pool. "Adrea," he said, "I've killed seven hundred ninety-two people."

Adrea, a sun-tanned blonde listed on the books as his secretary, lay on the floor engaged in her one secretarial pursuit: sorting Phil's weekly mountain of fan mail. Like most people in the entertainment business, she was contemptuous of the public and amused by its naive antics. "Here's one, luv, from a real doll of a cretin."

He said it again, louder, "I've killed seven hundred ninety-two people."

"So what, Rod luv?" Adrea said casually, not looking up. "They were all baddies."

"But that's not the point—" Phil's hand was unsteady as he rubbed at his burning eyes. Odd little sparks danced in the darkness behind closed lids. What was the point?

Another thirteen weeks of tevee's most durable private eye show, *Steel Rodman: Trouble Shooter,* had just been put in the cans. Phil, its star, had felt burned

out and had come home with a more than usual weird sense of unreality. He couldn't sleep. Instead he'd stayed up all night pouring over hundreds of filed back copy scripts of the *Steel Rodman Show*. And he'd finally gotten the exact figure. 792 assorted 'baddies' had been scripted to death by Steel Rodman, the champion of right, the good guy in his white Ferrari.

The figure persisted. It seemed to expand and ache in his head like a malignant tumor.

"I've got to know," he said suddenly and jumped to his feet. "I've got to find out."

Adrea was alarmed now by his wild look. "Know? Find out what, Rod luv?"

He grinned down at her grimly. "Why you call me Rod for one thing. Why do people call me Rod? Why do you? Millions of people out there in teveeland write letters to Steel Rodman? Even my mother's letters for the past three years have called me 'Dear Rod.' Why—why do millions of people think Steel Rodman's a real person?"

"But, Rod luv—I mean—"

"The name's Phil, baby. Phil Norman. There's no such person as Steel Rodman. He's just a character I play on tevee, remember?"

"But I don't really believe—I mean *they* don't really believe you're Steel Rodman."

"Sure they do, baby." Phil hurried into the bedroom, soon came out wearing a suede jacket and adjusting an ascot tie. "And I'm going to find out why. I've got to. Who—what are those millions out there who really believe in Steel Rodman? How could they think I'm really Steel Rodman, that Steel Rodman could actually kill seven hundred ninety-two people?"

He kicked at several piles of fan mail. "Where's that one from the senorita? Arrillos. Maria Arrillos wasn't it, from Santa Cielo? Where is it? Give it to me."

She rummaged and came up with an expensive envelope smelling of strong lilac perfume. Phil grabbed it, put it in his pocket and started for the door.

"Luv, where you going? What's the matter?"

"I'm really going to answer some fan mail," Phil said, pausing a moment at the door. "They write to Steel Rodman for help. They think he's real. They're in trouble and they want Steel Rodman to come out and shoot a baddie. Okay, I'm going out. I've got to find out what it's really all about out there!"

"Wait, please wait!" Adrea almost screamed as she reached for the phone. "Please, go see your headshrinker first!"

Phil Norman laughed thinly. "He's probably abandoned his real patients and is at home studying television, trying to solve the neurotic problems of Peyton Place. Listen, baby, millions of letters go to Vince Edwards, but they're addressed to Ben Casey. Thousands

of emergency calls. They think Ben Casey's a real doctor and only he can perform miracle oprations. I've got to find out what the hell kind of a world it is out there that eighty million people would rather believe in teevee!"

He ran out into the fading California sunlight and jumped into his white Ferrari. As he roared down Beverly Drive toward Sunset Boulevard and the San Diego Freeway, the dried palm fronds hung absolutely motionless. Not a leaf or flower in that sea of luxuriant artificial growth stirred. The world seemed dead, or like a great wax stageset.

He stopped once for a beer south of San Diego, on the Coast Highway overlooking the blue Pacific. He was doing an odd thing; he had to admit it. But it wasn't compulsive. He'd been thinking about this really answering some fan mail for months. All those millions out there writing in and asking Steel Rodman for help. All those women in distress. Women in trouble, imagining there was really a Steel Rodman who could help them. Millions of them out here somewhere haunted by a 'baddie' they wanted to be rid of.

How many of them were some kind of lonely schizophrenic nuts? How many were in real trouble, with real baddies waiting in the wings? How many of them really believed that Steel Rodman—

He choked a little and put the beer glass down on the bar. The headlines of a *Los Angeles Times* left on the bar said: MAN KILLS WIFE AND FIVE CHILDREN WITH AXE

Phil swallowed heavily, lit a cigarette and took out the fan letter from Maria Arrillos. It was, he remembered, fairly typical, but he hadn't chosen it at random. But because Santa Cielo was a conveniently short drive from L.A. He re-read the letter quickly.

Dear Steel Rodman, Trouble Shooter: My father and my brother, Orlando, are in danger of being murdered by a corrupt Sheriff Owens and his filthy crew. But I fear even more for the loss of family honor in this sick and evil world

You must be capable of such cool and efficient violence. You must help me, for I can turn to no one here for help. Friday night I must go into Santa Cielo to try to save my brother. I must go to La Golindrina. Please be there to help me by the parking lot between 9 and 10. If you do not come, there is one other way I may escape dishonor—

Phil slowly pocketed the strange note and walked back out to his Ferrari.

How much of it was real? Well, he would soon find out. This was Friday night. And the historical little Mission town of Santa Cielo was less than an hour's drive away. As he drove he suddenly thought

of that last line in Maria's fan letter, and he felt a twitch in his stomach. ". . . *there is one other way I may escape dishonor.*"

What way is that, Phil thought nervously? Suicide?

Suicides, even baddie suicides, were never allowed on the *Steel Rolman Show*. Too morbid.

THE MAIN drag of the famous little pioneer town was lit up like Christmas. A banner draped across the entrance said: *Santa Cielo Centennial*

Fireworks and pistols firing blanks pocked the night with explosions. A gay crowd, decked out mostly like Hollywood Spaniards, milled along through rows of food and game stalls, while silver-plated horses in fancy leather trappings and black-and-silvered cabelleros galloped around waving sombreros. Guitars, castanets and accordions furnished background music, while fandangos were danced on the streets and bars belched drunks and juke music onto the sidewalks.

Phil Norman parked his white Ferrari on a moonlit sidestreet under somber cypress trees and walked over to Main. After asking himself why he hadn't driven straight to *La Golindrina* parking lot, the answer disturbed him. He'd done what Steel Rodman would have done, the unexpected. Keep 'em guessing. But this wasn't a script.

Phil stepped back out of the festive stream of pedestrian traffic. He looked at a lean, bearded cowboy peddling cardboard sombreros and big buttons pinned on a large board. The cowboy also wore a cardboard sombrero and one of the big buttons on which was written: *Santa Cielo Centennial.*

In fact, Phil realized as he glanced around, everyone from toddlers to grandpas wore the cardboard sombreros and buttons with *Santa Cielo Centennial* conspicuously inscribed. Everyone but Phil Norman.

"What's this Centennial business?" Phil asked the cowboy.

"A very profitable one, Jack," the cowboy grinned. "We celebrate in honor of the settlement of Santa Cielo. First town in California. Settled by the Arrillos clan back in seventeen hundred sixty-eight."

"Arrillos?" Phil said, a bit surprised to find that the name was real.

"Aristocratic old family. Came up with the Rivera expedition from Mexico in seventeen hundred sixty-three."

"You sure know your dates," Phil said.

"Everybody round here knows those dates, Jack," the cowboy grinned. "History's good business in these parts. Old Mission's still out at the end of Ramora Street. One buck fifty a tour."

"What about the Arrillos?"

"Arrillos ranchero is south of

town about five mile. Supposed to be real live Arrillos out there yet. Direct descendants of the first Arrillos, or least that's what they say. It's just—"

"Good business," Phil interjected wryly, and started to walk on. But the cowboy gripped his arm and spun him back around. His

grin, Phil now noticed, was nasty.

"Jack, you'd best buy yourself a hat and a button. You don't want to be too conspicuous. What I mean is, Sheriff Owens is taking the lid off Santa Cielo tonight. There'll be some fancy rolling, knifing, culling and branding before morning. There's folks here that'll get real mean seeing a fella who ain't properly civic minded."

"How much?" Phil asked.

"Buck for the button. Two for the hat."

Phil laughed. "Your civic minded Sheriff Owens must get a big cut of that, cowboy."

"That ain't what you ought to be worrying about," the cowboy said. But Phil Norman was walking on down the street without sombrero or button.

He stood outside the Main Street entrance of the parking lot beside *La Golindrina,* a night club, until after ten. There was no sign of Maria Arrillos. He was beginning to suspect strongly that Adrea had been right, that he should have gone to see his headshrinker. Then the scream came from the dark recesses of the parking lot.

The scream of a woman, the ragged, breaking scream of a woman in distress.

Phil had heard the same sort of scream breaking out of a thousand tired scripts, and he found himself doing just as he had done a thousand times before. He didn't think, he just acted out of habit.

He ran straight into trouble.

A car roared past Phil, heading for the parking lot exit. He saw the terrified white face of a woman behind the wheel. In the glare of the headlights, for a moment, he also saw the body. It lay on oily gravel right at Phil's feet, like a dummy someone had stolen from a waxworks. Then the car was gone. The headlights were gone. The corpse receded at Phil's feet into a dark blur. But he could still see it clearly etched in antique finery.

An odd numbness seized him; he stood there staring down at the blob as if he were trapped in a dream, trying to wake up. A pe-

culiar fear gripped him, a sense of unreality. He had stood just like this looking down at countless suddenly exposed bodies.

But this one, he thought vaguely, is supposed to be real, not some tired extra lying there. That stuff oozing out of a hole in the forehead wasn't ketchup. Phil knew this body was real, that this death was somehow real.

But he stubbornly retained that unreal sense of one caught between sleeping and waking. Phil remembered that strange old Chinese enigma: *Am I a man dreaming I am a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming it's a man?*

Part of the unreality was caused by the costume of the corpse. He kept seeing the tall young man lying there with a face that looked like white porcelain. No cheap masquerade outfit, no cardboard sombrero, but the real thing. Black velvet faded by the years. Tassels and heavy silver conchaes and rich silver and golden embroidery. Faded velvet bolero jacket, inlaid with gold. On each side an embroidered golden lion holding a torch in one claw.

Phil remembered that the letterhead on Maria Arrillos' note was the same, a golden lion holding a torch.

Gravel popped around Phil. He heard a fat wheezing breath. Suddenly a flashlight beam shot from beside him and illuminated the corpse again. Phil couldn't see anything clearly but the corpse. When he moved his head the flashlight, joined by several others, glared, blinded his eyes.

"He's—he's dead," Phil heard himself say.

"Well now, son, how'd you figure that?" said the wheezer.

"Looks like a .38 caliber bullet hole in his forehead," Phil said, feeling the words roll out easily, without a forethought. "No sign of the weapon around, so obviously he didn't commit suicide. This is murder—"

"You don't get any argument there, son. Here, you dropped something."

Phil felt something against his hanging right hand. He instinctively closed his fingers on it; then he glanced down and jerked his hand up and away from it as if he'd grabbed the wrong end of a soldering iron. He had been tricked into gripping the butt of a .38 caliber revolver. Now, of course, his fingerprints were on it.

At that moment, as he looked up at the fat man who was holding the .38 by the barrel, Phil Norman was more frightened than he could remember ever being before in his life. It was as if a sudden cold wind blew over him, and the night seemed to grow very still, and he felt alone and defenseless.

"That gun isn't mine," Phil whispered.

"Didn't say it was, son. Just said you dropped something. Gun can

belong to anybody just about. And just about anybody can fire one if he takes a notion. Say a notion to steal the gold and silver and wallet from one of our most prominent and beloved citizens—"

"No!" Phil interrupted with a kind of bark. "You can't mean that. It's ridiculous. I mean, I've got no reason to—"

"You'd best button up for a while, son. I'm Sheriff Owens, with a few deputies here to help me keep law and order."

He was a wide, fat man in khakis, cowboy boots, a Sam Brown belt. He wore a cardboard sombrero and Centennial button and he was wrapping a blue bandanna around the .38 revolver butt as he smiled out of a face as chubby and good-natured looking as a honeydew melon.

"I'm sorry to say, son, I have to take you in and hold you on suspicion of murdering young Orlando Arrillos."

PHIL NORMAN was taken by two of Sheriff Owens' deputies into a dimly lit room back of La Golindrina. The body of Orlando Arrillos was also taken in there and laid out on the floor beside a pile of whiskey cartons and empty beer bottles. Sheriff Owens had said he had to make a phone call to old man Arrillos, tell him about his boy's misfortune. A funny blue-blooded old breed, the sheriff had said; the Arrillos insist on taking care of their own. Got their own burial ground and like that.

The two deputies frisked Phil. One of them, a lean wiry redhead in boots and faded levies, and wearing white eyebrows under his cardboard sombrero, took the money out of Phil's wallet, put it in his pocket, then looked at Phil's identity.

"Phil Norman," the redhead said. "Hollywood." He studied Phil's face out of pale blue eyes about as expressive as glass chips. "Ain't I seen you before? You do bit parts in a movie now and then maybe?"

"No," Phil said, "but I'm—"

He stopped himself. He sat down heavily on a carton of Old Sam Thompson bonded rye, and slowly ran his flat wet hand across his face. He had started to say that he played Steel Rodman the big tevee private eye, and then he would have called his lawyers in Hollywood and they would have had him out of this stupid tourist trap faster than you could say, "Your option's been dropped, buddy."

Which is exactly what would happen if his real identity leaked out around here. People thought he was Steel Rodman, and if they ever found out that Steel Rodman had let himself get into a silly lashup like this, the image would be broken. His option would be dropped with an unprecedented thud. He would be finished flak in

the entertainment business. His agent wouldn't be able to sell him as a stand-in for a dog show.

They must never find out about this, he thought. That meant he had to shut up, keep out of jail, and get out of here, out of Santa Cielo, out of the county. Clean, too, like he had never been here, never heard of the place, never heard of Maria Arrillos in particular—

Phil looked with thinly disguised desperation at the two tough deputies seated there on whiskey cartons. A drop of sweat crawled down the side of his face. What could he do?

He had to admit that after playing Steel Rodman so often he should know what to do. He did, in fact, know just about everything there was to know about crime, violence and the complex arts of mayhem. Blank cartridges were used on the shows, of course, but just the same Phil was an excellent shot with small arms. His sponser's ad-agency and public relations outfit had insisted that Phil become an expert shot in order to put on live exhibitions for doting fans, strengthen the public image of Steel Rodman.

But the idea of using his skill to really shoot someone, even a baddie, suddenly seemed appalling to Phil Norman. Anyway he didn't carry a gun.

He also had learned sufficient karate and judo to make those frequent scenes seem authentic. Phil also, as part of the image, happened to be six feet three inches tall, two hundred and ten pounds, with very little fat.

Only this redhead deputy and his Mexican sidekick, Juan, weren't stuntmen paid to take a fall. Juan was playing with a frog-sticker with about an eight-inch blade. And the redhead had a revolver stuck in his belt.

Phil sat and sweated and worried. The redhead picked his teeth with a wooden match. Juan played with his knife and looked puzzled at Orlando stretched out on the floor. No one had bothered to close the corpse's eyes. They stared unblinking up at a naked yellow bulb with the glazed detachment of a frog.

"He don't look any different," Juan said, "than the other Arrillos."

"Just ain't walking around no more," the redhead said. "That's the only difference." The redhead grinned at Phil. "That how you figured it, Hollywood boy? He looked dead anyway, so you just figured to make him look more natural?"

The redhead and Juan chuckled, and Phil shivered. Then a car stopped in back. Gravel crunched toward the rear door. Juan looked at it as it opened and took off his cardboard sombrero. "It'll be Don Arrillos," he said with the deference of a peon, "still walking around.

Phil Norman stared. When Don

Arrillos followed Sheriff Owens in, he did look like the walking dead, like a regal ghost. He seemed at least a century old and walked with the controlled rigid caution of an alcoholic. Thin gray-black hair that might look well on merely an old man resembled a wig when worn by a mummy.

But, like Orlando's, his costume was real. Rich faded velvet bell-bottomed pants and bolero jacket, heavy with silver and gold embroidery. Silver trimmed hand-tooled leather belt and holster with a gold-plated derringer. He would not, Phil thought, be believable on the home screens, not even as a vampire.

Don Arrillos stood in stiff silence and looked down at his dead son. He said nothing for a while. There seemed to be very little expression on his face, as brown and wrinkled as a dry walnut. But Phil felt a sense of lonely and dreadful sadness, or tragedy.

"We nabbed the killer right off, Don Arrillos," Sheriff Owens said. He had also removed his cardboard sombrero making his head, which was totally hairless, further resemble a wet honeydew melon. "Attempted robbery, looks like. Your boy evidently put up a terrific struggle, died fighting like a true Arrillos—"

"Please," Don Arrillos said, his voice imperious despite the fact that it sounded like dry paper was crumbling inside of him. He held up a slightly quavering gloved hand and the huge tasseled sombrero hanging on his back looked like a hump. "I'm quite aware of the true situation here. I will take my son home and then I will be back to see you, Sheriff Owens. You will be here. There will be a settlement."

Sheriff Owens nodded to his deputies. "You boys take Orlando out to the station wagon. I'll march our killer over to the lockup."

Don Arrillos turned, walked out. The word killer, Phil thought, hadn't impressed him. Maybe he knew better. Maybe Orlando had known better, too, and look what had happened to him. The Don might very likely soon follow Orlando to the family plot. The words from the fatal fan letter came back to Phil: ". . . *my father and my brother, Orlando, are in danger of being murdered by a corrupt Sheriff Owens* . . ." So Maria seemed to know better, too.

What had happened to her?

What will happen to me, Phil reminded himself? Juan and the redhead had carried Orlando out.

Phil heard the car drive away. The deputies were still outside. The odds, Phil knew, were as even right now as they were ever likely to be again for him. He was alone with the sheriff, who was reaching into one of the cartons and pulling out a bottle of bourbon.

"No reason why a man can't celebrate a little," Sheriff Owens said, "even if he is on duty, seeing it's the Centennial and all."

What, Phil thought oddly, would Steel Rodman do? The answer was easy. Steel Rodman had been in spots like this hundreds of times. You have to know some of the real thing to make the tricky scenes look real. The trick now was to make the scene as real as it looked. No time for retakes. Reshooting was out of the question. One shot from Sheriff Owens would put Phil on the cutting-room floor. *Karate.*

Phil stood up and made a straight forward lunge with all of his weight behind his stiffened arm. His extended fingers sank an inch into Sheriff Owens' windpipe.

Three-fourths paralyzed in an instant, unable to breath, Sheriff Owens crashed down into a pile of beer bottles gagging and gasping, his face turning blue. Phil shattered the naked overhead bulb with a bottle, crashed out through the door into the moonlit alley and kept running under the cypress and pepper trees.

He heard yells and shots following him. He ran faster, reached the side street, turned right, ran faster until he jumped into his Ferrari. Then he found it even easier to outrun the sheriff's deputies as he tooled the souped-up Ferrari out through the moon-sprayed arid hills and sand dunes.

The sounds of patrol cars faded out, until there was no sound at all but the powerful hum of the Ferrari's engine and gravel crackling up from the tires.

He had to head out of Santa Cielo fast, lose it forever. If the newspapers ever got wind of this fiasco, he and the show would be a laughing stock. And Steel Rodman would be quickly buried in a clown's grave.

But he was going the wrong way. Outside of Santa Cielo, instead of cutting northwest, he had taken the south fork. Soon after taking this gravelly side road he had known it was the wrong turn, but he had kept going rather than look for a way to circle back to the coast route. His unconscious had forced him onto this south road. Without realizing it, he had remembered what the cardboard sombrero and button salesman had said. The south cut-off led five miles out of town to the Arrillos ranchero.

How had Maria missed seeing him waiting at *La Golindrina* parking lot? That would have been her scream he heard, and her face, pale with fear, in the car that had rushed past him out of the parking

lot. Now what? Would she really kill herself because Steel Rodman, her last hope, hadn't appeared in answer to her fan letter? Every other incredible thing had turned out to be real so far. Why not that?

She would be pretty hopeless, Phil thought grimly and drove faster along the winding dipping road through the arid hills. There couldn't be much hope left for anyone who had nothing to believe in any more but Steel Rodman, a ghost from a picture tube.

HE DROVE IN down a weed choked lane between crumbled adobe walls where a faded sign hung on link chain: RANCHO ARRILLOS

He moved in slowly, with motor low, then killed it and switched off the headlights and coasted into the concealment of orange trees and grapevines. He began walking cautiously toward the ranch building. Moonlight caught splotches of old adobe through the cypress trees and eucalyptus, splotches which shone with the pallor of old polished bones.

Phil jumped over a gurgling irrigation ditch and hid in a grove of pepper trees as the station wagon, painted with desert dust, pulled out of the rancho's yard and headed south. He glimpsed Don Arrillos' ghost-pale face at the wheel.

Phil crept across a weed-grown courtyard and along a crumbling arcade. Chickens squawked. A keening wail came from somewhere in back, reminded Phil of Indians and death chants. Then he came to an open oaken door, and looked into a large low raftered room with big stone fireplace, walls covered with cow-skins, stone floor on which were fan-backed chairs, a couch covered with a bear hide.

The heavy, hand-hewn furniture, Phil thought, seemed genuine and would probably be worth a fortune in an antique shop. Candles as thick as an arm flickered around the body of Orlando who was lain out before a small altar, everything but his face covered with a black cloth.

And that, Phil assumed, would be Maria Arrillos. Another slim regal ghost in black mourning dress, black shoes, black mantilla, black hair. Her face on a pale slender stem of a neck was as white as Orlando's. But it wasn't the face Phil had seen driving the car out of *La Golindrina* parking lot. If that woman had been Maria Arrillos, this one wasn't.

He stepped into the room toward her.

"Maria Arrillos?" he said softly.

She turned toward him slowly and stared with incredulity mixed with fear.

He stepped closer, close enough to see the veins moving in her white throat. She raised thin hands on which he could see blue veins running like thread. Recognition swam

into her eyes, the recognition of suddenly, for the first time, seeing a ghost.

"You!" she whispered harshly. "Really—"

Phil interrupted. "I waited at *La Golindrina* as you asked me to do in your letter. I waited, but you didn't."

She shook her head in confusion. Her lips parted and closed several times. Her hands danced slowly before the candle flames like moths.

"Sorry—I'm sorry—" she whispered. "I didn't really believe. I mean those letters are just little games. Little games you have to play because you're alone. Make-believe, you know? When you're alone and just about everything is gone, you sometimes have to pretend. Don't you?"

Phil looked at Orlando. "That isn't make-believe."

"No," Maria said.

"Your note also said your father was in danger of being murdered. Is that make-believe?"

"No," Maria said.

"So you really did know what would happen to Orlando at *La Golindrina*. It wasn't make-believe. How in the world did you know?"

"But you—you're not real," she said, and gave a shaky little laugh. "Are you?"

"That doesn't matter now," Phil said impatiently. "What's this all about? How did you know about the danger to your father and Orlando?"

As she led Phil Norman into a smaller room shelved with books bound in faded leather, bears' heads and serapes on the walls, he sensed a curious air of stale and hungry respectability about the place. A vaguely familiar air. Then Phil realized what it was—the smell of a museum.

Maria had poured two large glasses of wine from an unlabeled bottle, handed one glass to Phil and started drinking out of the other without even taking time to click rims. Then she licked her lips and held her glass, suddenly half empty, up to the light shining through a tasseled lampshade.

"Our own. Famous wine of the Arrillos," she murmured. "A toast to gentler worlds than this one, where you don't have to pretend so much."

They drank to that. Phil put his glass down, but Maria kept drinking to whatever Phil guessed she did a lot of drinking to. A few drops of wine spilled down the bib of her dress, but she didn't seem to notice.

He asked her again what it was about. She spoke in a tone of odd fatalism, as if everything had passed a point of no return. As if even tomorrow and today had ran far back into the hazy distance where life begins to merge with history.

She had overheard a terrible

scene between Don Arillos and Orlando. A quarrel, a confession of sins, corruption. About money, of course, or the lack of money. There had used to be wealth. Acres of grazing cattle, vineyards, mines. There was nothing now but history.

The Arrillos ranch was, in actual fact, a museum. The family survived by conducting tourists through the rooms. They could make a great deal more money with this *tourista* racket, but Don Arrillos hated it. His old proud heart wasn't in it. And Orlando had never been capable of anything of a practical nature.

"He intended to be a poet, you know," Maria said. "But he never was. And he ended up—well, like that."

"Murdered," Phil said. "Why?"

She laughed softly, without humor and poured another glass of wine. "Why? Perhaps because the old days are gone and life is murder these days, murder of one kind or another. Romance and poetry are dead. Yes, all dead. And even make-believe has poison in it. Why? A woman pretended to love him. She wanted money. Orlando made some terrible mistake because of this woman and money. He got involved with these crooks who run this county, men like Sheriff Owens. Or anyway he knew about them. I heard him tell father that he had made some terrible mistake. Something to do with wetbacks. *Braceros*. Illegal Mexican labor and whatnot. Mexicans in a mine-shaft—"

She drank. Now she swayed a little and her big black olive eyes were wet and abnormally bright. "Orlando said he'd made a terrible mistake, had threatened to tell the Feds. That's what he said. Feds. Government men, I suppose. And for threatening to do that, he said, they would murder him. And he told father, so I assume they would murder father too. I used to read the newspapers, you know. They were full of murders every day. Murder solves nearly everything now. Hopes, dreams, poetry and people—just kill them—"

She leaned back against the wall. Phil noticed a cobweb trembling in the lamplight. "So I knew Orlando was supposed to be murdered. I heard him make a date with this woman—Julie something or other—Friday night at *La Golindrina*. She insisted. I knew she was really sheriff Owens' girl, one of that gang, being used to trap Orlando, corrupt and destroy him. I found out the truth about her. I told Orlando. He wouldn't believe it. Wouldn't listen at all. He had to pretend that something was good, that one last thing might be good. So he wouldn't listen to me. I told him it was—what they call it?—a set-up. He wouldn't listen. So what could I do about it? I drink some wine, maybe too much and I look at television."

She laughed again softly. "All is murder on television, too, but on television something is done about it. It always seems to come out right. So I drank wine and looked at the television and I thought of you. Yes, maybe for a while I really believe in you sometimes. We who are alone and helpless have to believe in something that can help, for a little while anyway. Sometimes—"

A chill went down Phil's back. His mouth was dry. "Your father said he was going back to Santa Cielo for a settlement with Owens. But he just drove out of here heading south. Why?"

Maria shrugged. "Owens isn't at his office much. He's too busy looking after his profitable enterprises. He may not be in Santa Cielo now. I heard father call there. More likely Owens is also going south. *Sunset Motel* is on that south road, that's where Julie stays. She's strictly the motel type. Orlando just wouldn't believe me."

She shrugged again. "And the old mines are out south too. Old quicksilver mines, you know. Oh, the Arrillos were so wealthy once, really and truely. Grazing cattle, vineyards, quicksilver mines. It's all in the history books."

He took her hand. It was cold. "Wait here, Maria. I'll be back. Wait here. But maybe you should stay out of sight."

She squeezed his hand, then quickly dropped it. "Who are you?" She tried to smile. "I mean, there isn't a Steel Rodman for really. I mean, not really. So who—"

"Don Quixote," Phil said as he backed out of the room.

Her faint unreal laughter followed him through the shadows of the low raftered room, where candles flickered around the body of Orlando, who had wanted to be a poet.

PHIL NORMAN shivered as he tooled the Ferrari on down the moonlit gravel road heading south. They had dreams and fantasies, Phil thought. And they had pretensions and make-believe, and they had the television on long lonely nights. When all that failed, there was the bottle. Then what?

He fought a panicky urge to turn, find a way back to the San Diego Freeway. He yearned for the familiar routines of Hollywood. Television wasn't real either, but it was a lot safer than this. You were much much safer being an actor in people's dreams than making personal appearances when they sobered up out of their dreams.

But all the time, in some strange way, he knew he couldn't turn back. He seemed carried along by forces beyond his control. For one thing he was angry, very angry because of what was being done to naive and innocent people. And he was even angrier at what they had tried to do with him, and could still do.

This Julie had been the woman driving out of the parking lot. She had been the come-on who had screamed, then left Orlando dead. A set-up all right, Phil knew. And he had ran right into it without his cardboard sombrero or Centennial button. A conspicuous, convenient, made-to-order patsy. Phil reminded himself that Owens still had the murder weapon with his fingerprints on it. That would never do.

PHIL NORMAN would have driven past the *Sunset Motel*, mostly blacked out, but he recognized the shine of Don Arrillos' station wagon in the moonlight. He drove off the road into a clump of cottonwoods beside an irrigation canal. Then he walked back to the bungalow and looked under the blind of an open window.

Don Arrillos faced Julie. Phil was sure this tough leggy blonde wouldn't be anyone else. Anyway, he recognized the face that had driven out of the parking lot at *La Golindrina*. She was worn down with use, but there had been a lot to start with and most of what was left was revealed by a thin green nylon housecoat as she paced angrily, puffing a cigarette. Lingerie was scattered everywhere. The bed was a twisted mass of sheets.

Don Arrillos, still in costume for the tourist trade, stood in regal dignity. He looked at Julie like a scientist forced to study something despicable under a microscope as he said, "I will ask you once more. Where is Owens?"

"I'm telling you for the last time, you old goat, get lost!"

"I called Santa Cielo. His office is locked and he's left town. I thought he would be here. Is he at the mines?"

"If I did know, why should I tell you, you creep?"

"Because if you don't tell me, I fear there will be unfortunate consequences," Don Arrillos said in that same tone of dry crumbling paper. "Even more unfortunate than they already are."

She flung an ashtray that barely missed Don Arrillos' face. It smashed into the wall near the window. Nothing about Don Arrillos had moved except the tassels on his sombrero.

"Don't you take off that circus hat when visiting ladies?" Julie screamed.

"Yes," Don Arrillos said.

"You're insulting me!"

"I'm afraid that isn't possible," Don Arrillos said.

"What do you want with Owens anyway? Can't you leave well enough alone?"

"I must kill him," Don Arrillos said calmly. "My son told me everything, you see. It seems that you and Owens have not only killed my son, but you have killed the name of Arrillos. The name without honor is a dead name."

"So now you know too, dad,"

Julie said. Phil saw her eyes flicker toward the swinging doors that led into the kitchenette. "That's real sweet, that is. Just what is it you know so much about?"

"You tempted my son into corruption. You work for Owens and you used my son as a murderer uses a gun," Don Arrillos said. "You enticed him into that parking lot, where Owens' men shot him. An innocent man will be blamed. The charge will be murder while attempting robbery, although that isn't important, is it?"

"None of this is, dad, except in your addled head," said Julie.

"Owens had an underground deal with some local farmers to furnish them with illegally imported Mexican laborers. Laborers who have no workcards and are smuggled into California to work for a third of what legal labor demands. Owens gets so much per head. After bringing them in, Owens hides them on my property, in my old quicksilver mines, while closing contracts and hiring them out—"

As Phil listened to the rest, he watched the swinging doors into the kitchenette. They moved once. A shadow shifted there. He shivered but the slight desert wind stirring through the moonlight was warm. There was at least forty wetbacks in one of those old mine shafts right now. Orlando had been let in on it, made to cooperate with the help of money and Julie. If the racket were exposed, the Arrillos could take the rap. The mine was on Arrillos land. Orlando had been hoodwinked into signing some papers.

But Orlando had found out about Julie being Owens' little helper. He had threatened to tell the Federal Agents about the wetbacks if Julie didn't leave Owens and marry him. So they decided to kill Orlando before he could shoot off his mouth. And the old man would have to go too.

Phil Norman could still hear Julie's laughter as he slipped around in back of the bungalow and peeped in through a crack left by a partly open Venetian blind.

The redheaded deputy stood there by the swinging door. He had a revolver in his right hand and he was about ready to step through and use it. Phil could plainly hear the voices from the other room echoing through the kitchenette.

"My daughter, Maria, will never find out the truth of this sordid story," Don Arillos was saying. "I'll kill Owens, you, everybody, understand, to cover up the filthy facts. My daughter will live. She will be spared a story of dishonor."

Julie laughed shrilly. "Your old head's full of holes, dad!"

"This gun has defended the honor of the Arrillos many times," Don Arrillos said.

The redhead started to lunge through the swinging doors. Phil heaved the rock through the rear

window. The window glass crashed in all directions. The big frosted globe hanging from the ceiling in there exploded like a balloon. The kitchenette blacked out. Phil saw flashes of gunfire as he backed off into the shadows, shivering.

The redhead staggered back through the rear door and fell down in the moonlight. A little dust cloud rose up and hung over him. Something about the way his body lay there made Phil feel that he was dead. He didn't care to find out one way or another. As lights went on in other bungalows and windows banged and voices yelled out into the mysterious and threatening dark, Phil ran back through saltbrush and gravel to his Ferrari.

When Don Arrillos' station wagon roared by, swaying a little as if someone were about to lose control, Phil pulled in behind it. Still heading south, Phil thought, so it must be on to the mines.

The mining shack was set into the side of a hill. Diggings from the old abandoned mine shafts spilled down the hillside, white in the moonlight like a frozen waterfall. Phil drove the Ferrari off the winding rock road about a hundred yards from where Don Arrillos had stopped the station wagon. He waited a few minutes, then walked to the shack.

Through a tear in a dirty curtain ragging a window without glass in it, Phil saw Owens with his back to the window. Juan sat at a wooden table where an oil lamp flickered. Don Arrillos stood in the open doorway. His fancy gold-plated derringer was in his right hand. And then when Owens shifted his weight a little, Phil saw that he had a .38 revolver in his hand. Juan had that eight-inch bladed knife in his hand.

"I will kill both of you now," Don Arrillos said calmly. "I've already disposed of your redheaded friend. The woman has left *Sunset Motel* for parts unknown. She is never likely to incriminate herself by re-appearing. If she does, it will be her word against mine. There won't be anyone else to speak. You will both be dead. The wetbacks will slip back into Mexico. In any case, it's my word they will believe when I say I have nothing to do with this criminal smuggling, this modern slavery. I am an Arrillos."

"You were an Arrillos," Owens said.

This time Phil didn't see a rock that seemed big enough. So he heaved up a rusty flywheel from an old broken-up gasoline motor. It must have weighed fifty pounds. When it crashed through the rotten wooden window frame, it struck Owens in the back. He didn't quite fall down, but was carried across the room into the table where Juan was trying to throw his knife at Don Arrillos.

By then Don Arrillos' derringer made two sharp cracks. Owens fell

on the dirt floor and rolled over like a wet log. Phil saw a hole in his forehead. Juan yelled, held his bleeding arm, dropped the knife, ran for the door. Don Arrillos shot him as he went out.

Outside, Juan stopped yelling. The only sound he made was the sound a rock makes rolling down about a thousand feet through brush and tumbling shale.

Then Don Arrillos stared at the broken window through which the mysterious flywheel had come. He looked for a while, puzzled in a dreamy sort of way, like a sleepwalker. Then he turned and walked out of the cabin. Phil found the murder weapon with the bandanna around the butt in Owens' squad car. He carefully wiped his fingerprints off it and put it back in the car.

Phil drove the Ferrari northwest this time. He kept going until he hit the San Diego Freeway. He didn't stop at the Arrillos Ranchero to see Maria either. He hated to break a promise to a fan, but enough was enough. He didn't stop anywhere until he got back to Beverly Hills.

He staggered into his living room at three A.M., and collapsed on the couch. Adrea was still waiting for him and there on the rug were the piles of assorted fan mail.

Adrea got down on her knees beside the couch and caressed his forehead. "What's happened, Rod luv? I mean Phil—"

"That doesn't matter now," he said. He shivered with exhaustion. And with other things. He wasn't sure what. He felt burned out and raw and afraid.

"You're so pale," Adrea said. "You look sort of like death warmed over."

"Yeah," he said.

"You said you wanted to know, luv. Find out about them, the facts. Well, did you find out?"

"Yes."

"What did you find out, luv? Tell me."

Phil Norman tried to smile. "I found out that they're right, all of them are right, luv. Television is better."

HOW THE COOKIE CRUMBLED

by ED LACY

A New Truly Exciting Short Story Next Month

NEW! NEW! NEW!

SHELL SCOTT

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

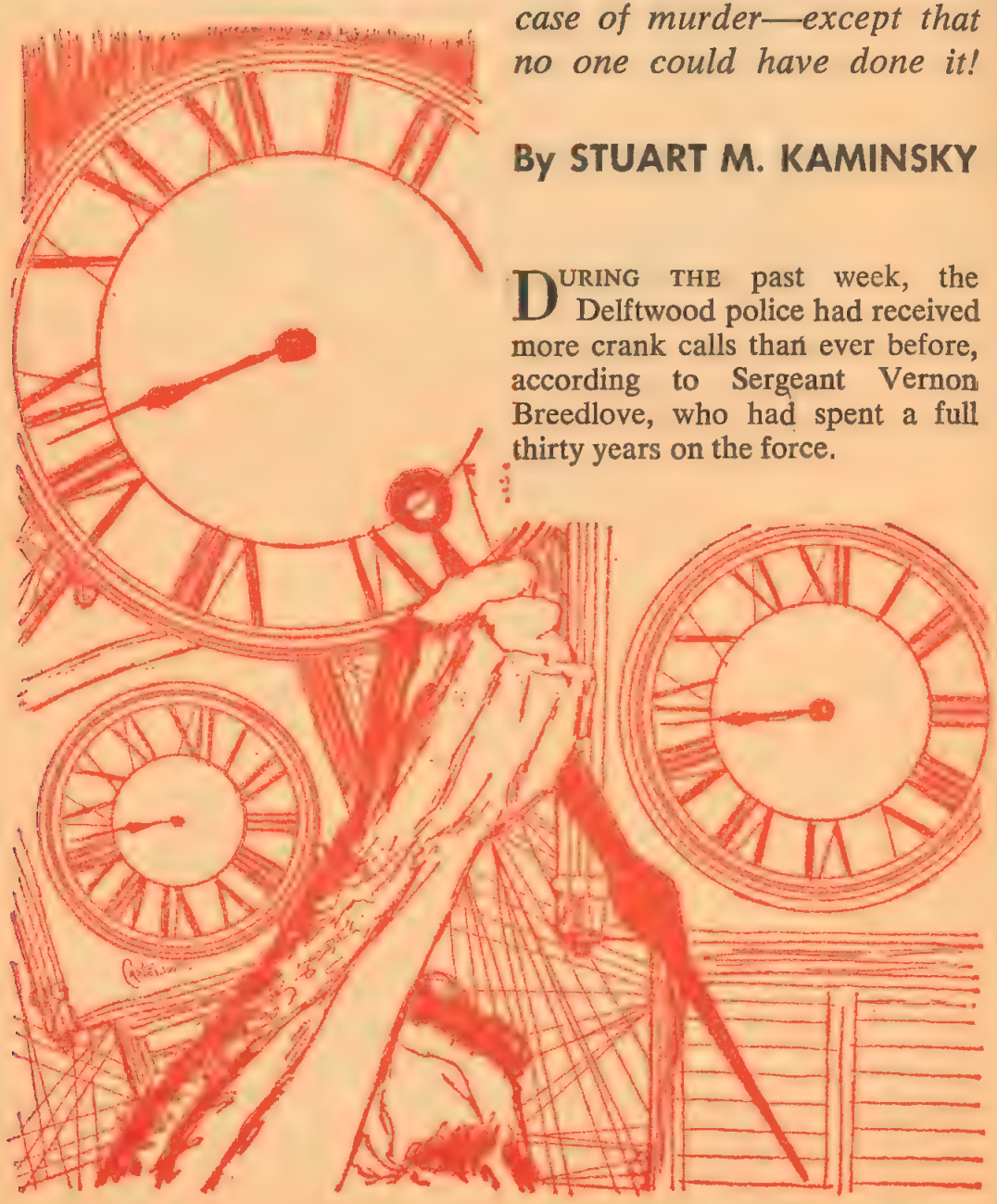
40,000,000 Readers Can't Be Wrong!

Yes, more than forty million readers have purchased Shell Scott paperback novels. Now, exclusively yours, we proudly present his very own brand-new magazine featuring his ebullient and picaresque capers. Ask for SHELL SCOTT MYSTERY MAGAZINE at the same newsstand you purchased this copy of U.N.C.L.E.

A CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM

He lay dead behind a locked door. It was an open and shut case of murder—except that no one could have done it!

By STUART M. KAMINSKY



DURING THE past week, the Delftwood police had received more crank calls than ever before, according to Sergeant Vernon Breedlove, who had spent a full thirty years on the force.

"Just last night," Breedlove said, scratching his bald, freckled head, "Ryan got a call from old lady Sowmes at the gift shop. She's sure it was a warlock done it."

"What's a warlock?" asked Captain Lenny Witt, sitting down at his desk to enjoy his morning coffee and cinnamon roll. He sat carefully to keep from wrinkling his pants.

"A witch, a male witch." Breedlove dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief before putting on his frayed police cap.

Witt, a handsome, youthful-looking man in his early forties, examined himself in the mirror on his desk and brushed back his slightly grey hair with his hand. There was a pile of reports on the desk, most of which, he was sure, were about the Decker murder. *The Murder That No One Could Have Committed,* according to the headline in the Delftwood *Courier-Dispatch.* If any of the reports had been worth checking, it would be on top marked with a red check by Breedlove.

"That's as good a guess as any," Witt sighed, taking a sip of coffee.

"No, I like the mayor's idea best," Breedlove added quickly, settling heavily in his chair and crossing his hands over his ample stomach. It was part of the informal morning meeting between the two men—a ritual for the past five years, ever since Witt took over, with ambitions of moving up to mayor, or maybe even getting elected to the state house or senate.

He was sure the mayor and the rest of the local party bigwigs understood this and approved, but so far nothing had happened. If nothing broke on the Decker business soon, Witt knew he could forget about the party touch for the coming elections. His job was safe, but with something like this over him, he couldn't expect much. He'd have to spend most of his time defending the fact that they knew nothing about the murder. The party had control, but they wouldn't want to risk an opening.

The Chicago papers were already on to the story and would surely make the most of it if they dared to run Witt for anything.

"And that's the only way I can see to figure it," said Breedlove.

"Possibly," murmured Witt, who had just caught the last few words.

"Then you'll see him," said Breedlove.

"See who?"

"Why my grandson, Pete. Say, have you been listening to me?"

"Of course," Witt replied, bolting down a bite of roll. "But what has a twelve-year-old boy got to do with this? Yesterday you brought Rabbi Gold, who suggested that it might by a dybbuck or something. The day before it was that parking attendant at the City Club with some idea about transporting knives through walls. We've got enough theories."

Witt picked up the pile of reports on his desk for emphasis. "We need facts."

"We've got all the facts there are, Lenny. We need to put them together." He stood up and leaned over the desk, pleading.

"All right," Witt shrugged, finishing off his coffee. "I'll see him sometime."

"He's right outside," Breedlove said quickly, walking to the door. "Stopped by on his way to school."

Before Witt could stop him, the portly sergeant was out the door and ushering in a chubby blond boy who was wearing an orange pullover sweater and carrying a notebook and a few books.

"This is Pete," said Breedlove, proudly prodding the boy forward.

Witt rose and extended his right hand. "I think we met once before when I talked at the school."

The boy nodded in agreement and sat on the chair next to the desk. He was very short and his toes barely touched the floor. Witt felt a bit silly and resolved to set Breedlove straight on a few things as soon as the boy left.

"Now your grandfather tells me you have some information on the murder. Did you know Mr. Decker?"

"I saw him around. Everybody knew him, sort of."

"Yes, Delftwood isn't so big. Most of us 'sort of' know just about everybody in town," said Witt casting his eyes down on the first report.

"I guess," said the boy.

"Well now, what do you know about this business?" said Witt looking directly at the boy.

"We know who did it."

"We?"

"Bollo and me," said the boy.

"Bollo?"

"That's me," added Sergeant Breedlove sheepishly.

"How did you get a nickname like that? No, forget it. If you've got some idea about this thing, why didn't you tell me?"

"Well the boy really figured it out," beamed Breedlove. "I just supplied the facts."

Witt sighed and touched his nose, feeling a sinus headache coming on.

"Can we review the facts?" said the boy. "I've got to get to school."

"Of course," said Witt resignedly.

The boy pulled out a small notebook, cleared his throat. "Last Friday night," he began, "Bubblehead Decker—"

"Pete," interjected Breedlove.

"Sorry, Bollo," said the boy looking up.

Witt was sure the headache would soon be on him.

"Well," Pete said, "Decker invited four people up to his old house to stay the night. One was his son, Doc Decker, the dentist who lives on Burry Lane. Another was Bubble—Mr. Decker's ex-partner, Greg Fells. Another was Fells's wife. And another was Mrs. Craig,

who used to work for Mr. Decker till she got the arthritis."

"She got arthritis, not 'the' arthritis, Pete," corrected Breedlove.

"Let the boy tell it his way," said Witt, adding, "I'm aware of all this, you know. The boy looked hurt. "All right, tell it your way."

"Well, it seems Mr. Decker said he was going to cross the whole lot of them off his will the next morning and leave everything to the Daughters of the American Revultion."

"Revolution," corrected Breedlove.

"Revolution," repeated the boy, marking it in his book. "Well, he wasn't above it for pure spite, from what Bollo told me. Anyway, he told them they were all there so he could keep an eye on them to keep them from getting any ideas about killing him.

"And they had reason, what with Fells thinking old Decker had cheated him out of the business and Mrs. Fells mad about something that old Decker tried to do once that Bollo won't tell me about." The boy gave his grandfather a pouting look and Breedlove blushed.

"Anyway," Pete went on, "Mrs. Craig, who took all sorts of things from that old man for more than thirty years, she was mad too and Doc Decker sure was—maybe more so cause old Decker had told him about it the day before. The only other person in the house was the housekeeper, Miss Jessop, who Bollo said didn't care much for Mr. Decker because he tried to do the same thing with her that he did with Mrs. Fells. I think I know what it is, but I'm not supposed to know for a couple of years."

"I'm getting a headache," said Witt.

"Shall I get you something?" asked Breedlove.

"No, thanks. Go on, Pete."

"So, the front door was locked that night and from the inside with a couple of bolts, right?"

"Right?" said Witt weakly.

"And all the windows have bars inside cause Mr. Decker was always scared of burglars, right?"

"Right."

"So, when he was found dead the next morning, you knew it had to be someone inside or else someone inside had left someone else in. And everyone in the house said they didn't leave anyone in. Bollo says there was dust on the windows and the dirt was soft, so no one did get in."

"Yes," added Breedlove. "So someone inside had to be the murderer."

"But we know no one inside could have done it," Witt sighed. "Look, there is one window in Decker's room where we found him. It's a little one with bars. The room is on the third floor. The room was locked. The window was sealed fast and had never been opened. It couldn't be opened.

There are no secret passages or any such nonsense in the room and there's only one door."

Witt looked at the boy and felt like an idiot for arguing with a twelve-year old boy who was crinkling his nose and scratching his head with the same gesture as his grandfather. "Furthermore, the door was locked from the inside. We found the key on the floor. Add to that the fact that both Doc Decker and Mr. Fells spent the night in the hall right outside the room and you get no where."

"Can I ask you a couple of questions, Captain Witt?" said the boy, flipping through his notebook.

"Why not?" Witt slumped back.

"You were with Bollo when they broke down the door to Mr. Decker's room?"

"Right. Solid oak. It took three of us—the doctor, your grandfather and me, ten minutes to get it down."

"Mr. Fells didn't help?"

"No. He was weak from some dental work the doc had done on him the day before. He'd had some trouble that morning. In fact, he didn't even want to come to the Decker house, but the doc insisted saying he'd take a look at it there and keep an eye on him."

"Right," said Pete. "When you got the door down you found Mr. Decker in bed dead with a thin puncture wound through to his heart and no weapon?"

"Right."

"When did you find the key?"

"Almost immediately," said Witt. "Doc saw it at the foot of the bed."

"Why did Doctor Decker and Mr. Fells spend the night outside the door?" said Pete, ticking off questions with a pencil.

"Doc thought it would be a good idea in case anyone in the house got any idea. Old Decker agreed."

"Right," said the boy. "Now, did either the doctor or Mr. Fells fall asleep during the night?"

"They claim they didn't," said Witt.

"Yeah," added Breedlove smugly. "They purposely stayed awake and watched the old grandfather clock out there on the landing. Both claim they heard it strike every hour and quarter hour and both claim they never heard a sound inside the old man's room all night. Never thought anything was wrong till they knocked on his door in the morning."

"What's more," added Witt, "Miss Jessop spent the night at the foot of the only stairway, at the old man's request, and she claims no one went up or down. We searched every inch of the place, so we know no one brought the weapon down."

"Could Miss Jessop see the doctor and Mr. Fells on the landing?" asked Pete, chewing on the well-gnawed pencil.

"No," said Witt, "and she couldn't hear them either. But don't sug-

gest that they—the doctor and Fells—worked something out together. Fells is a coward, wouldn't trust his own grandmother, let alone a Decker, like the doc. He might do it alone, but not as a partner."

"One more question," said Pete. "Did the clock in the hall have the right time when you got there?"

Witt was puzzled and searching for aspirin in his desk when he replied: "No. As a matter of fact, it was ten minutes off. I wanted to make a note of the exact time and noticed that the clock was different. Why?"

"Was the grandfather clock ten minutes fast or slow?" asked the boy.

"Slow," said Breedlove quickly.

"That's what I thought."

"You thought what?" asked Witt.

"I thought Doctor Decker was the murderer," said the boy closing his notebook and jumping down from the chair.

"What do you mean, Doctor Decker?" Witt almost screamed.

"What kind of anesthetic did Doctor Decker use on Mr. Fells that Friday morning?" asked the boy.

"Procaine," said Breedlove quickly. "I checked."

"So?" said Witt.

"Well," said Pete, "he uses hypnotism on me and Bollo. He tried it on Mr. Fells, but on him it didn't work."

"That's what Fells told me when Pete asked me to ask him," Breedlove added.

"Well," Pete went on, "what if it did work and the doc pretended it didn't? Doc already knew he was going to be cut out of the will. He knew Fells would be asked to come to the house. He was even sure he was there."

Witt's eyes opened wide. "Wait a minute. You can't hypnotize someone into killing someone else. Even if you could it's too risky, and what makes you think Doc Decker could do any more than just the simplest hypnotism?"

"Easy," said Pete. "He didn't have to do much. All he had to do was what the book I got out of the library said. By post-hypnotism, that means—"

"I know what it means," said Witt.

"Well," Pete went on, "all the doc had to do was give him a post-hypnotic thing to send him to sleep for ten minutes."

"Right," said Breedlove, coming over to the desk. "If the doc tried this post-hypnotic thing and found it didn't work and Fells didn't close his eyes, nothing was lost. He'd just give up the whole idea."

"Killing your own dad is called patricide or patracide or something like that," said Pete.

"I know," said Witt. "Wait. The clock."

"That's why it was ten minutes off," said Pete. "Mr. Fells had to think he hadn't gone to sleep all

night. So Doc Decker set the clock back to where it was when he got Mr. Fells to wake up after the murder, so in case he looked up at it, he wouldn't think any time passed."

"He probably even got him to look up at the clock," said Breedlove beaming proudly at the boy.

"You mean," said Witt, "Doc just put Fells to sleep, knocked on the door and got his father to open it. Then he stabbed the old man and locked the door before going out and changing the clock back?"

"Sure," said Pete looking at the clock on Witt's office wall. "Mr. Decker wouldn't have been suspicious, since he knew they were both out there."

"The key," said Witt in mounting despair.

"He just dropped it on the floor when you broke down the door in the morning. Remember, he was the one who found it."

Witt looked down at the boy dizzily. "The weapon," he gasped. "What about the weapon?"

"That was a little harder," said Pete. "Bollo helped me figure that one out. You see when Bollo told me the clock in the hall was ten minutes off I was pretty sure I had most of it, but I started thinking. If the doctor was so smart, why didn't he forget about the business with the clock and just keep Mr. Fells talking or something for five or ten minutes so he wouldn't know what time passed. Then I figured it. He wanted Mr. Fells to look at the clock for a good reason."

"What reason?" asked a defeated Witt sinking back in his swivel chair and spying his suddenly aged face in the mirror.

"He wanted Mr. Fells to remember the clock in one piece because he probably used the hand of the clock to kill Mr. Decker."

"It's big enough, Captain," he could hear Breedlove saying—Witt had closed his eyes. "I checked."

"Yeah," said Pete. "He killed him, cleaned the weapon on the bloody sheet and put it back on the clock. Simple."

"Very," said Witt.

"I think I saw a fleck or two of blood on it when Pete asked me to check it this morning," Breedlove said.

"I'm going to be late for school, Bollo," the boy complained.

"I'll call your teacher. Now go on and don't talk to anyone about this. I'll see you at lunch."

"Okay, Bollo. Good-by, Captain Witt. It was nice to meet you."

"Yes," whispered Witt without moving.

The boy left, slamming the door behind him.

Witt's head was a mass of pain. As bad as it had been before for his political future, this was even worse. A twelve-year-old boy had come up with—Well, being in

charge of a police force was not a bad life. Besides, in eight or ten years Pete Breedlove might want to join the Delftwood police force, and then—

"Captain?"

"Yes, Sergeant?"

"What do you want to do?"

"You and—who's in the outer office?"

"Lawson?"

"You and Lawson go ask Doctor Decker to come and see me. See that he comes."

"Right," shouted Breedlove brightly, before waddling out the door like a giant version of his grandson.

Witt reached for the aspirin box again. He had a lot of work to do.

NEXT MONTH'S NEW U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE WORLD'S END AFFAIR

Illya and Napoleon Solo had one day to find and destroy THRUSH's latest, deadliest challenge to U.N.C.L.E.—an unbelievable man-made storm which could bring the world to its knees—or to ruin!

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Remember, every month you will find Illya and Solo here in a brand new novel about U.N.C.L.E. Put your order in now at your favorite dealers!

THE STOLEN PAINTING

by DAN ROSS

"You want me to steal?" Wong said. "I am an honest man. My answer, therefore, is — yes."

THE TALL, aristocratic man with the graying hair and neat white mustache said, "What I want you to do, Mr. Wong—is steal a painting for me."

Mei Wong's broad moon face showed no surprise at this remarkable statement, although the proposition did come as somewhat of a shock to him. Colonel Simpson was one of Bombay's most astute art collectors; a man with an impeccable reputation, liked by everyone in the Indian city's international set.

The stout old proprietor of the Bombay Art and Curio Studio leaned forward on his mahogany desk, hands cupped, his expression questioning.

"You are sure you have come to the proper person, sir?" he asked.

Colonel Simpson smiled. "You are perhaps the only one in Bombay who can help me," he said.

Mei Wong arched an eyebrow. "I had no idea my years as a dealer had brought me the reputation of being a thief."

"And they haven't!" Colonel Simpson was quick to reassure him. "May I sit down?" he asked.

Mei Wong waved a hand to the chair before the desk. "By all means. This seems to require more explanation."

The gray-haired man in the white linen suit seated himself with a deep sigh. "You remember Stephen, my nephew?"

Mei Wong nodded. He had dealt

Featuring

MR. MEI WONG

with Stephen Simpson a number of times when he had come to Mei Wong's studio in the Empire Hotel representing his uncle.

He had been quiet, astute, a pleasant type.

Colonel Simpson's gray eyes narrowed with concern. "You perhaps don't know that he has recently left this country and returned to England?"

"I had not heard," Mei Wong admitted. "When we last met he told me he had an idea of setting up his own art agency. I thought it could fill a need in Bombay. We have few specialists in the field."

The man opposite him frowned. "I felt the same way. But it did not turn out well. Now he has gone and left a most unpleasant situation behind him. Through an error he may have ruined not only his own reputation but mine as well."

Mei Wong was struck by the seriousness of the colonel's tone. "Perhaps you will be kind enough to explain," he said.

"To put it bluntly," Colonel Simpson said, "he sold the Landers Gallery a forgery. Innocently, I believe, but he is not here to prove it —if, indeed, it could be proven. A Scherman landscape. You may have perhaps seen it."

"In one of the upstairs display rooms," Mei Wong said. "A dark pastoral scene. I remember it." He paused. "How do you know it is not genuine?"

The gray-haired man sighed again. "Because I happen to have picked up the original."

"There's no question about this?"

"No question." Colonel Simpson leaned forward earnestly. "I will pay you five hundred pounds to steal the painting, Mr. Wong, and replace it with the original."

Mei Wong smiled. "The money does not interest me. But your proposition does hold a piquant appeal. I find the proprietors of the Landers Gallery a rather dull, unimaginative lot. I might enjoy matching my wits with theirs."

Colonel Simpson's face lit up. "You'd be doing me a great service, old friend."

Mei Wong carefully chose the time of day to make his appearance at the Landers Gallery. He knew when the director took a long lunch and it was then he presented himself to the young lady in charge.

"I have come about the Scherman painting," he told the girl.

She was blonde, attractive and at the moment puzzled.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," the girl said. "We have four Schermans in the upper gallery. Which one do you mean?"

"The pastoral scene," Mei Wong said gravely. "I believe it requires some cleaning."

"Are you certain?" the girl seemed bewildered.

Mei Wong nodded.

"I noticed it myself," he said. "It seemed rather dull."

The girl rose hesitantly from her desk.

"I'll go up with you," she said.

Mei Wong gave her a placid smile and followed slowly behind her as she mounted the stairs. At the upper level he trailed her into the middle room, puffing slightly from the exertion. There were a half-dozen visitors wandering about the large room, taking in the various paintings. Mei Wong beamed his approval on them. The best time to steal something was in the presence of witnesses, he decided.

A sleepy-looking uniformed guard sat near the door. The receptionist went across to him.

"Which of the Schermans is to be cleaned?" she asked.

"Cleaned?" the sleepy one echoed, rising slowly. "I don't know." And he led the way across the room to the spot where the four Scherman paintings were on display.

Mei Wong and the girl followed him. The girl stared at the pastoral scene worriedly. Then she glanced at Mei Wong. "You are sure this is the one?"

The old art dealer pretended to look at it carefully. "I'm sure this is the one. Don't you agree it is dull?"

The girl eyed it doubtfully. "I believe it is, just a trifle."

The guard, no longer quite as sleepy-eyed, nodded his assent. "I've noticed that one for a long time. The director was frowning at it the other afternoon."

The girl showed relief at this underlining of Mr. Wong's case. She smiled at the old art dealer. "Well, that seems to settle it. What do you propose to do, Mr. Wong?"

The spectators in the gallery were

now grouped quietly behind them, listening to the discussion with hushed respect. Mei Wong considered. "I could have the director send it to my studio. But it is not large and I have a taxi waiting. No need to bother him with the details. I'll take it along with me."

"Of course, Mr. Wong," the receptionist said, and turning to the guard. "Get the painting ready for the gentleman," she instructed him.

"I have had several calls about this matter," Mei Wong told the girl confidentially. "It would be perhaps wise not to disturb the director with the business at all. I would only be bound to annoy him."

The girl smiled at him knowingly. "I understand, Mr. Wong, I know his disposition all too well."

Five minutes later Mr. Wong walked out to his taxi with the guard, carrying the carefully wrapped painting for him. Thirty minutes later he was in Colonel Simpson's office, the painting flat on the gray-haired man's desk as they both studied it.

Colonel Simpson shook his head. "I can't imagine how you managed this so neatly," he said.

Mei Wong smiled. "I had helpers," he said.

Colonel Simpson went into an ante-room and returned with the other painting and placed it on the desk beside the one Mei Wong had just brought him. He said, "Now you can see how much alike they are."

Mei Wong bent over to appraise the two identical pastoral scenes.

"You are quite right," he said. "It would take an expert to be able to identify the original."

Colonel Simpson regarded him nervously. "Well, I'll ask no questions, Mr. Wong. I'm sure you will find a way to restore the real one to the Landers Gallery as easily as you managed to get the fake."

The old art dealer looked at him with stern eyes. "I will manage, Colonel. But the painting I will take back will be the same one I stole. It is your copy that is the forgery. I'm sure you knew this when you decided to ask me to help you perpetrate this fraud."

The gray-haired man's shoulders slumped. He turned away with a sigh. "I might have known I wouldn't get away with it. You are much too clever to be deceived in a matter like this."

The old Chinese regarded him sadly. "Why, Colonel? After our long friendship."

The tall man turned to him with equal sadness in his aristocratic face. "Put it down to avarice, Mr. Wong. I had this excellent forgery and I knew the original was available. So I made up the story about Stephen, feeling sure you would help. I'll never forgive myself."

Mei Wong said no more. He knew Colonel Simpson's conscience would torment him beyond mere words. And he thought he perhaps understood the tall man's predica-

ment. He had known other collectors who had allowed their interest in art to become an obsession. Best that he should return the painting unobtrusively and hope for the best.

The following day he chose the same time to take the painting back to the Landers Gallery. The girl was on duty again. She smiled as she saw him.

"You're not back already," she said. "Most restoration jobs take ages."

"I worked late on this one," Mei Wong told her. And in truth he had given it a slight cleaning. "It is ready to be hung again."

The girl took him upstairs and was impressed by the change in the painting. The sleepy-eyed guard thought it looked much better and Mei Wong accepted their plaudits with suitable modesty. He was relieved to be rid of his burden.

He was on his way out when suddenly, in the main corridor, the elderly director of the Landers Gallery came toward him. A scowl was on his face. Mei Wong gave a deep sigh. This could only mean trouble.

The director, Mr. Alec Winthrop, cleared his throat angrily. "Glad I caught you, Mr. Wong. About that painting!"

Mei Wong nodded. "Yes?"

"Can't imagine why I didn't get in touch with you before," Mr. Winthrop said importantly. "Meant to several times and it completely slipped my mind. Of course it needed cleaning badly. Glad you noticed and took it on yourself to do it."

"It was a pleasure," Mei Wong said. "Such art deserves the best attention."

"Quite so," the elderly Mr. Winthrop was ready to agree. "Now about your fee, Mr. Wong. If you will kindly send me the bill I can assure you it will not be overlooked."

"There will be no bill," Mei Wong told him.

The gallery director raised astonished eyebrows. "No bill, Mr. Wong?"

"Not this time," Mr. Wong said gently with a slight smile on his broad face. "I would prefer to chalk this small task up to an unusual experience."

A NEW COMPLETE SOLO AND ILLYA NOVEL NEXT MONTH

Too Much Alibi

by T. C. McCLARY

Dead men tell no tales—unless you're a copper too pig-headed to believe an old cliche!

DETECTIVE *'Doubting'* Thomas frowned at the suicide note and said, "I don't like it. It covers too much. It provides a perfect alibi for the two people who might be

suspect if it turned out to be murder."

Bronstein, who was leg man on the case, said, "He probably wanted to cover them. The bank says it's Harwood's handwriting and signature."

"Damned strong writing for a twenty-year invalid with a touch of palsy."

Bronstein grinned at his superior's skepticism. "You want to tell the bank it's not his signature after all?"

"It might surprise you, but banks goof too. What do his lawyers say?"

"They say it's the McCoy. They want clearance to put the will into probate."

"Tell 'em to go fly—" Thomas growled. "It's too pat. Why would an invalid of twenty years want to commit suicide just when a new treatment was making enough progress so that he could take a lady friend and consider marrying her?"

"She's the loser. That clears her."

"Maybe. What's she like?"

"Good looking divorcee about thirty-eight, who somehow missed the boat. She admits that she was grateful to meet a man of Harwood's status who would provide security and companionship."

"She know she's not named in the will?"

"I let her see Harwood's last note. She said it was his writing and in character, that he trusted his nephew completely."

"Does *she?*"

"She said Harwood must have had a reason for leaving things the way he indicated."

"And this nephew, Bruce Harwood, was out of town at the time of death. In fact, he'd been sent away by his uncle—so the note says," Thomas snorted. "Presumably to avoid interference with the suicide, or to keep Bruce clear of any possible suspicion. Very thoughtful of a man whose mind must have been chiefly upon his own approaching end."

Thomas took the note up again and reread it for the twentieth time.

Know all men by these presents:

I, Oliver P. Harwood, after considerable thought, am taking this opportunity to end a sickly, futile life rather than further burden those whom I hold dear.

To this end, I have sent my nephew, Bruce Harwood, to Connecticut on family business so that I may be alone in my final moments.

My last will and testament, naming my nephew sole heir and executor of my estate, will be found taped to the back of the center painting on the right wall, opposite my desk. It is my desire that Mrs. Maribel Yeats be notified of my death immediately and told that she may

rely upon the generosity of my nephew in making adequate provision for the security that in better health I would have provided her myself.

My last thoughts are for her understanding and future happiness.

May God understand that this act appears to me the best solution for all concerned.

(Signed) Oliver P. Harwood,
1:43 P.M.
June 11, 1965.

Thomas scaled the note back onto his desk with a growl. "A most careful gentleman! He indicated the time he was going to die, so that there would be no possible dispute."

"But it is still his writing," Bronstein said. "His study was locked from the inside. It was the maid's week off; Mrs. Yeats had no key to the house, and we have verified the fact that Bruce Harwood was having lunch in Stamford. The coroner raises no issue at all. Although the body had deteriorated in the heat in the forty-eight hours before it was discovered, he fixes the time of death between noon and three o'clock as of date. Also, he sees nothing suspicious about the angle of the stab."

"That guy doesn't know as much about suicides as I do," Doubting Thomas said.

"What's bugging you?"

"Suicides don't stab up into their hearts. They either stab down, or straight in, or make a cross, or slash their throats."

Bronstein sighed and reached for one of his superior's cigars. "You're going to make this a murder if it kills *me*, huh?"

"Maybe I'll make a detective of you before retirement," Thomas snapped. "Let's go over this again.

"Oliver Harwood has been tended night and day for twenty years either by nurses, his nephew or the maid. Yet within three months of getting rid of the nurses and taking a mistress, he selects the week of his maid's vacation to kill himself.

"In order either to be alone, or to protect his nephew from any possible suspicion of involvement he sends him to Connecticut that morning, saying that he will make out for himself by ordering lunch from the restaurant or inviting the Yeats women in.

"After his nephew is safely out of the way, he locks his study door, sits at his priceless antique desk to compose his last worldly note, and times it as carefully as a countdown at Cape Kennedy. Thereafter, he removes an historic hari-kari knife from its inlaid scabbard, presumably says his last prayers, and plunges said knife at an angle directly into his heart. Not only is the stab accurately placed and death instantaneous, but one plunge of the dagger does the job.

"And this from a rational man, cool headed enough to write that

last note—not a man driven by fury or depression or mania. Furthermore, a man who is weak and wasted from twenty years of no exercise, and who suffered palsy!"

Thomas stared at Bronstein. "You ever try to stick a knife through clothing?"

Bronstein scowled. "It does take some doing. It would seem that he'd have to lay the point of the knife against his body and then thrust."

"You're damned right he'd have to. And that takes *thrust,* brother. With a super octane tiger in it."

Bronstein's mind ran through the counter evidence. There was no way of entering the study except through the one door. Bruce Harwood had returned home at approximately two-forty-five the third day after his departure. He had found the door to his uncle's study locked. Unable to get a response, he had found another key which fitted the lock and tried to get inside. The half turned key inside had prevented it. Thereafter, he had called the police, and Bronstein himself had come and had been the one to open the door with a pair of keyhole pliers.

Such pliers were not hard to obtain, but their use was generally known only among locksmiths or habitual criminals. Bruce Harwood had not appeared the mechanical kind. He had watched the ease of Bronstein's operation as if hypnotized.

Bronstein remembered what Harwood's garage man had said about him. "Wouldn't know a carburetor from an exhaust," he'd laughed. "One time, I remember, they were having trouble at their house with keys falling out of locks. They've got those big old-fashioned locks with keys that weigh a ton. I told him to get steel keys and have them magnetized so they'd stay in the lock, and believe it or not, it took me half an hour to make him understand why it had to be a steel key to magnetize. He wanted to magnetize the old brass keys."

Bronstein sighed. "No, I just can't picture Harwood with enough mechanical savvy to find out how to lock that door from the inside."

Thomas gave a grunt of reluctant agreement. "What about those locks? They're original colonial locks, aren't they?"

Bronstein nodded. "The old single action kind. They key inserted from either side trips a steel spring that either presses against the bolt, when locked, or rides atop of it, when open. But a key left on either side of the door prevents complete insertion of a key from the other side. In order to lock the door from the outside, the inside key would have to be pushed clear out of the keyhole. Just for the record, there were no other plier scratches on the key except mine."

Thomas scowled. He said, "All

right, let's go back to that note. How long has Bruce taken care of his uncle's affairs?"

"Since before he left college. Approximately, the full time of his uncle's sickness."

"A real dutiful, loving nephew," Thomas snarled.

"That's the neighborhood size-up."

"Who is going to inherit a nice fat chunk of cash for his consideration!"

"No doubt of that. There are no other relatives."

"But all of a sudden, his uncle's romantic interests threaten his inheritance."

"According to the lawyers, that was the only will."

"Unless another was being drawn. Real odd that in a house with its own safe, and with most of his business papers kept at his attorney's, Harwood would tape a last will and testament to the back of a picture, isn't it? Looks like he was in a hurry for his nephew to get his money."

Bronstein shrugged. "That trick is pretty common, even among the rich."

"And that picture was on the left wall," Thomas said.

"Hunh?" Bronstein sharpened. "Oh, you mean from the position Harwood was facing across the desk. It was on the right wall as you enter the room."

Doubting Thomas smiled suddenly. "Looks like that note was written by somebody outside the room and thinking of the room from where *they* wrote, eh?"

"Dig me, friend, dig me," Bronstein said.

"Let's suppose that note was forged by Bruce. He would probably have drawn several drafts before satisfied that he had covered all necessary points, just as his uncle would have covered them. He would certainly have forged the notes in the privacy of his own room. And from his own room, the picture he had in mind was on the study's right hand wall. But from the position where his uncle sat at the desk, he would have been looking to the left."

Bronstein gave a short whistle. "Ain't you the one! But—the note wasn't forged."

"You take this note back to the bank and tell them I think it was," Thomas growled. "Tell them to dig up Hardwood's signature and any writing they have from twenty years ago. Have them check whether Harwood ever gave his nephew power of attorney."

It took a full day. The bank investigator, antagonistic at first, looked somewhat sheepish when he came up with what the bank had. There was no power of attorney, as such. A month after Harwood's illness first struck him, he had written the bank a note by hand that they were to accept similar writing and the enclosed signature as his own thereafter.

The enclosed signature was a very crude copy of the shaky signature affixed to the letter, or to his strong, energetic signature of previously. The letter had been initialed by several bank officials and a vice president, since retired.

Thomas listened to the information with grim gratification and treated himself to a fresh cigar.

"So for twenty years, young Bruce has been his uncle's pen and signature," he grunted. "That only leaves the matter of the locked door then."

"Well, we can get a warrant and tear the place to pieces looking for pliers," Bronstein said. "But the chances are that if he used them, he dropped them on the way to Stamford."

Thomas shook his head. "Let's try another angle first. That old house has been maintained in colonial furnishings throughout. The key in that door should have been brass. Where are the keys?"

Bronstein's neck got red. "The only evidence impounded was that note and the death knife. There was no suspicion of foul play until you played Sherlock Holmes."

Thomas eyes sparked wickedly. "So you left the keys in the house."

"That's it," Bronstein said. "And neither of them were brass. They were steel replacements."

"That does it then!" Thomas snapped. "The keys were magnetized, and he used the outer key to make the inner one turn the lock. He probably had a hell of a time getting it to turn that heavy bolt anyway. That would account for the way he watched you do it so easily with the pliers."

"But there was no magnetic grip—well, not enough to cause attention, between the two keys when I tried the outer one."

"He gave you another duplicate, stupid. Where's that photostat of Harwood's original signature before he got sick?"

Bronstein waved an envelope. "What now?"

"We go get a confession and then we make a pinch. You got the picture clear? An invalid's liable to doze. Bruce came in and found his uncle asleep at his desk. Maybe it was a regular nap habit after lunch. He went behind him, crouched to place their shoulders at the same height, placed the knife at the arch of the ribs and then pulled it upward into the heart.

"He probably inserted the time as the last thing on the suicide note, meaning to stay away a couple of days and knowing the exact time of death is not easy to pin down within minutes. He put the time a couple of hours ahead, and was in Stamford at that hour. Pick up a small pair of keyhole pliers and let's go."

THEY FOUND Bruce Harwood in, wearing tie and jacket and wide mourning band for all the heat and that he was in his own home.

Thomas said innocently, "There's suspicion of foul play, Mr. Harwood, and we think we may have a suspect. We'd like to show you how we think this happened and get your reaction."

Using Bronstein to act the dead uncle, Thomas went through the pantomime of the culprit stealing into the room, going behind the chair, placing the knife and jerking it into the dead Harwood's heart. Then, nervously, he fixed the inside key in the lock so that it would trip most easily, drew Bruce outside and closed the door very carefully.

"Now, if you'll just loan me that duplicate key," he said.

Bruce looked pale, but nodded without panic. He disappeared down the hall and returned with a big old fashioned loop of keys, handing the detective the proper one. Thomas moved close to the doorknob, palming the key, and used the pliers to turn the key inside. He turned back to Bruce and said, "Try the door now."

Bruce stared bug-eyed. "How could it do that?"

"Magnetized," Thomas said. "TV is a great little instruction course. Looks like you put the wrong key back on the key ring, Mr. Harwood. You're guilty as hell."

"But there was the suicide note!" Bruce said hoarsely.

"Oh yes. You can probably make a fairly good facsimile of that, seeing as it was your writing."

He took out photostats from the bank. "Of course, over twenty years, you've grown more accustomed to writing somewhat as your uncle did. But there is no doubt about the discrepancy in your different signatures from twenty years ago."

Bruce Harwood fell back against the opposite wall. His forehead was streaming wet, his mouth was working. He pulled his collar loose.

"Why would I want to kill him —I loved him, and he gave me anything I wanted!" he said.

"But that would have ended with his eventual death, once he signed the new will in favor of the woman he intended to marry."

Bruce stared at him wildly. "He'd spoken to his attorneys?"

Thomas shrugged and let him think whatever his guilt conjured up.

Bruce gave a hoarse sob and flung his face to the wall. "Twenty years in this mausoleum—my whole youth burned up!" he cried. "I'd been loyal, I deserved his fortune. But the new will would have left everything to Maribel Yeats. It wasn't fair. You can see that—"

His cry turned to a gasp as he slipped, half fainting, down the wall to the hall carpet.

Thomas unlocked the study door and jerked his head at Bronstein. "Just too damn much alibi," he grunted. 'Take him away."

Watch Robert Vaughn and
David McCallum in

The Man From U.N.C.L.E.

The fastest show in sight!

IN COLOR FRIDAYS NBC-TV